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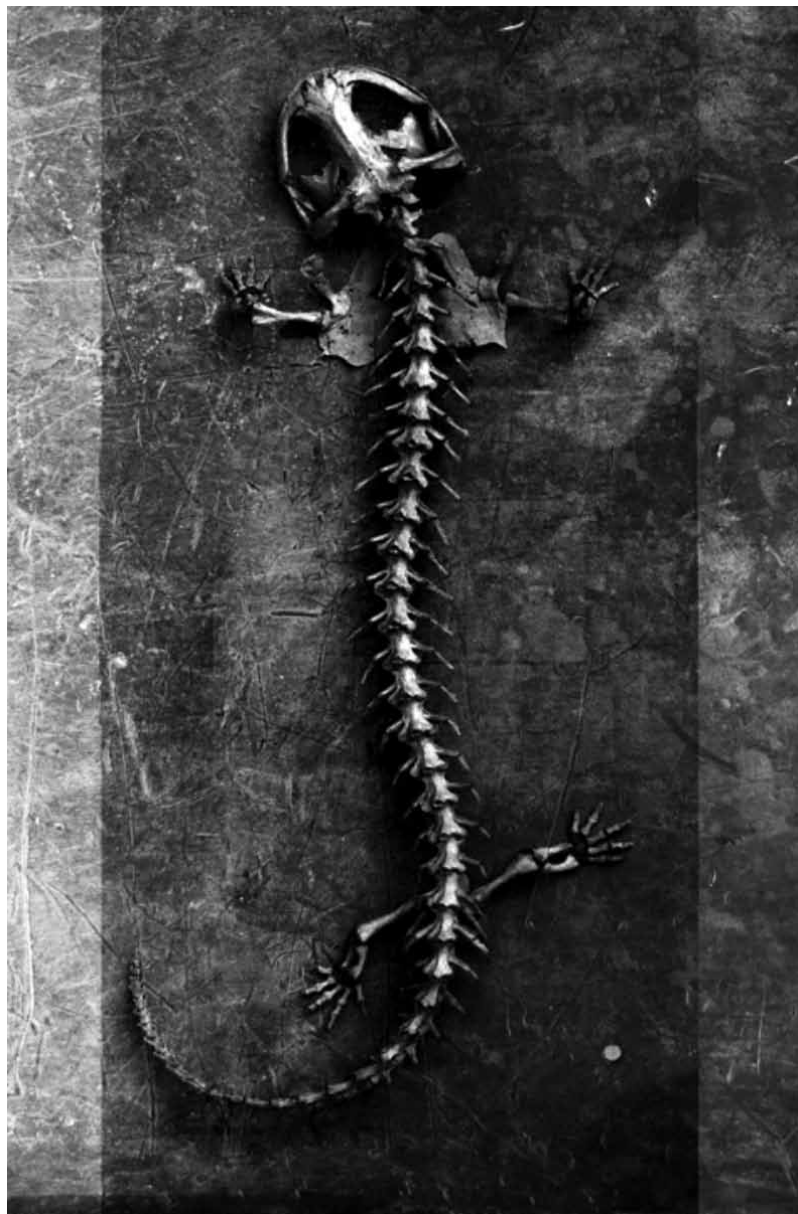
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Flat Worm

Dave Migman

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As the Wheel Turns

Aliette de Bodard

Prologue: The Wheel

In the Tenth Court of Hell stands the Wheel of Rebirth.
Its spokes are of red lacquered wood; it creaks as demons
pull it, dragging its load of souls back into the world.

And before the Wheel stands the Lady.

Every soul who goes to the Wheel must endure her gaze.
Every soul must stop by her, and take from her pale hands the
celadon cup, and drink.

The drink is herbs gathered from the surfaces of ponds,
tears taken from the eyes of children, scales shed from old, wise
dragons. To drink is to forget, for no soul can come back into the
world remembering past lives, or the punishments meted out to
it within the other Courts of Hell.

No soul.

Save one.

- - -

I. Yaoxin (Wen-Min Empire), 316 years after the Founding

The old beggar was a sorry sight squinting through rheumy
eyes. One of his legs was missing, and he leant on his crutch to
make his slow, unsteady way on the road.

Dai-Yu, in spite of herself, watched him. There was some-
thing about him that drew the eye; something that made her forget
the tea leaves and spices her mother had asked her to get from
the market in Yaoxin.

He seemed somehow more real, more sharply defined than
the rest of the world. Dai-Yu couldn't explain the feeling, not
even to herself.

As he passed by her, she drew a string of copper coins from
her sleeve, and held it out to him.

The beggar's hand brushed hers, sending a tingle of heat up
her arm. He stopped, then raised her palm to the light, staring at
the darker patch on her skin.

"I've had it all my life," Dai-Yu said, apologetically. "It's just a birthmark."

"I know that mark," the beggar said. "So you're the one, the child they were promised."

"What are you talking about?"

His fingers almost distractedly traced the outline of her mark. "Choice-maker. That's what the sign in your hand says."

He was crazy. He had to be. "It's just a birthmark," Dai-Yu protested. "I'm nothing."

He looked up at her, his face deadly serious. "You are the arbiter. You will have to choose between them."

The worst thing about the beggar wasn't his crazy talk; it was the single-mindedness, the way he kept tracing until Dai-Yu stared at the mark in her hand, trying to see the characters he'd spoken of. "Who—?"

"Tiger," the beggar said. "Crane."

The words he used weren't the names of animals, but rather their archaic forms. Even to Dai-Yu, who at fourteen had received no education other than the arts of housekeeping, they could only mean one thing. "The Founders?" She laughed, then stopped when she saw his eyes. The rheuminess was peeling away, revealing a keen gaze trained on her.

"Yes," the beggar said. "You will have to choose."

"Choose between what? The Founders have been dead for centuries! Demons take you, you've told me nothing!"

"There is a...an argument," the beggar said. "A question they could not solve."

"What question?" Dai-Yu asked, but he shook his head, and began walking away.

"Wait!" she shouted, but he wasn't shuffling any more—he was running towards the gates of Yaoxin as fast as one leg and his crutch could carry him.

Dai-Yu ran, too, steadily catching up to him—but then he passed through the gate, and she lost him in the marketplace. She stood shaking in the midst of the crowd, knowing she should have outrun him easily.

Later that night, she crept into the shrine of her ancestors and stared at the very earliest tablet: the one that bore, entwined, the names of the warrior philosophers who had founded the Empire. Tiger. Crane.

The beggar's words would not leave her.
Choice-maker. You are the arbiter.

- - -

2. *Yaoxin (Wen-Min Empire), 321 Years after the Founding*

They came a few years later. By then, Dai-Yu had married, and moved into the house of the wealthy merchant He En-Lai as his second wife. She spent her days running the household and helping to raise the three children of the first wife.

One hot, stormy summer evening, Dai-Yu was sitting alone in the wives' quarters, playing a mournful tune on the zither, when a gust of wind sent rain into her face. Startled, she got up to close the shutters.

And, slowly, became aware she was no longer alone.

She did not move. Guards, she knew, watched the house, and every door was barred.

"Dai-Yu," a voice chanted, and it was the lament of the wind. Another voice took up the words of her name, and whispered, "Choice-maker."

She moved, then, trembling, to face them.

They stood in darkness, both of them: vague silhouettes whose faces she could not see. They smelled of old, musty things, books left too long untended.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

One of them smiled. Teeth glittered in the shadows. "You are the child of the promise, Dai-Yu. You must choose."

Choose choose choose, whispered the other voice, a raucous, rhythmical chant like the calls of birds.

"You're dead," Dai-Yu whispered. "The Annals say you died in the Imperial Palace."

"We cannot die," the first voice said. "We became something else."

"It does not matter," said the second voice. "She must choose."

"You're crazy," Dai-Yu said, trying to deny the fear that clenched her chest. "Go away. I wasn't born to choose anything."

The first voice laughed. The sound echoed on and on under the lacquered ceiling, taking strength from the walls. "Do you truly think so?"

And Dai-Yu, shocked, saw that the birthmark in her palm glowed red, like maple leaves, like the lanterns of New Year's Eve. "No," she whispered.

"This is the choice laid before you." The first voice was the drawl of a large feline, one that would toy with its prey until exhaustion brought death. Tiger. "When we founded the Empire three hundred years ago, we argued over what would keep it together."

"Duty," Crane said. "Homage to one's ancestors, and respect for the law. Those are the things that will make us last."

"Man knows no duty," Tiger said, breathing into the room the humid smell of jungles. "Man knows no respect. Only fear will keep the Empire intact. Fear of our neighbours to unite us. Fear of death and chaos to keep us from crumbling."

Dai-Yu, poised near the open window, said, "This is...." 'a philosophers' argument,' she wanted to say. Children's words, without meaning. It's not ideas that will keep us together, that will keep the Hsiung Nu from our frontiers.

Crane whispered, "It is no game. The loser will renounce. No longer shall he guide the destiny of the Empire."

"Because you decide anything? What about the Emperor? What about the Imperial Court?"

A dry bout of laughter, from Crane. "Everyone listens to their ancestors, child. We cannot die. We still rule. Now choose."

Dai-Yu stared, trying to see their faces through the darkness. "I know nothing." They were each as vast and terrible, both as unfathomable. "This is ridiculous. Just find someone else."

"There is no one else." The shadows behind Crane drew the darker hint of wings the colour of obsidian. "Choose."

"I can't," Dai-Yu whispered, the words forced out of her before she could think.

In the darkness, she could feel their combined gaze, assessing her, judging her. The hollow in her stomach would not go away.

"Very well," Crane said. "You are not ready."

"Think on it," Tiger whispered. "We will come back."

There was no noise when they left, just the flick of the shadows returning to those of the wives' quarters, but Dai-Yu could breathe more easily; she no longer had the sense that every word she said was being set apart and weighed.

She could not stop shaking. What did they think she was, to be embroiled in their vast, unknowable games? She was human. She had a husband, and soon would have children of her own. She was no prophet, no wise woman.

All she wanted was to sleep, and to forget. To forget that they had ever been there, or that they would ever return.

In silence she moved through the house, her sandals making no noise on the slats of the floor. She was almost at the door of her own room when something stopped her.

She could not have told what. Like with the beggar, it was a sense that something was more real than it ought to have been.

The door to the nursery was ajar, as it had been earlier in the evening. And yet....

Gently, Dai-Yu slid the door open, then entered the room. Through the gaps in the shutters fell the white light of the moon, tracing the outlines of three beds.

Dai-Yu could feel nothing. Not even fear, nor anger. She moved towards the furthest bed, where Pao, the youngest son, was sleeping.

A ray of light lay across his face, throwing into relief what they had done to him. There were scars, like claw-marks: three swipes on each cheek, bleeding in the white light.

And it was a claw-swipe, too, that had opened his chest, laying the heart bare amidst its cage of ribs.

The wind whispered, in Tiger's voice: *A reminder, Dai-Yu. Until we return.*

She screamed, then: a sound torn out of her lungs that echoed throughout the house, a scream of rage and grief and despair. It woke the other two boys, who huddled in their beds, their faces frozen in shock. It summoned the servants, and then her husband and his first wife.

"Dai-Yu?" En-Lai, her husband, said. He was shaking her, but she could not answer him; she could not banish the image of the dead boy in his bed. The more he insisted, the more she withdrew within herself, until she hovered at the edge of a chasm in her mind, knowing that if she fell into it there would be no return.

"Lin Dai-Yu," another voice said.

She looked up. This was the district magistrate, with his jade robes of office and his velvet cap. Three militiamen had taken position at the entrance of the room, their staffs at the ready.

"What happened here?" The magistrate's face was stern.

"That slut killed my boy," the first wife said, quivering with anger.

Dai-Yu, still struggling to remain focused, could only shake her head. *No no no. Not I. He did that.*

The magistrate looked at her, his grey gaze expressionless. She looked back.

The magistrate's gaze moved to the bed, then back to Dai-Yu. "No. It could not have been her. What weapon would she have used?" He raised Dai-Yu's hands, displayed their shorn nails. "See," he said. "These are not claws."

"Then who did this?" En-Lai demanded in anger, and grief.

The magistrate's gaze rested on the servants for a moment. "Who indeed." And now his look was trained on the first wife, and on the long, lacquered fingernails that were her pride. Each of them was protected by an elegant bronze sheath—a sheath that tapered to a sharp, claw-like point.

The first wife was still standing near Dai-Yu, ready to accuse her again. Her gaze met the magistrate's, and her face pinched in anger. "You accuse me?" she said, drawing herself to her full height. "Of killing my own son?"

The magistrate smiled without joy. "I have seen mothers do worse than that."

"No," Dai-Yu whispered, understanding that the nightmare was not over. But no one was listening to her.

"You're making a mistake," En-Lai said, as the militiamen came into the room, and bound the first wife's wrists. "That accusation is ludicrous."

Dai-Yu found her voice from some remote place. "This wasn't done by human hands."

The magistrate turned to her. The light falling on his robes bleached them white for a moment, like a coat of feathers; a moment only, but in that moment Dai-Yu looked into his eyes, and saw the ageless, malicious gaze of Crane.

No.

6 "The law must be honoured," the magistrate said, with a tight smile, and they were not his words, but something far older, far more vicious. "A crime cannot go unpunished. We will find out the truth."

Tiger's voice in her mind, endlessly whispering its promise: *A reminder, Dai-Yu. Until we return.*

Crane's voice: *A crime cannot go unpunished.*

A dead boy in his bed, his face slashed, his chest yawning with the heart inside.

The first wife, struggling as they dragged her out of the room, screaming, calling them names. In vain.

The chasm in Dai-Yu's mind opened wider, and she tumbled into the darkness, screaming all the while.

Her husband En-Lai, seeing her face go slack, shook her again, but she no longer had speech.

The doctor, summoned to the scene, found the body of the boy, the husband protesting his wife's innocence, and Dai-Yu standing tall and straight, yet silent.

He listened to the voice of her heart, but could find nothing wrong. In the end, he prescribed a calming brew to En-Lai, whose sickness he could understand, then left the house, glad to be away from Dai-Yu's stare.

The first wife admitted to the murder of her son under torture, and was executed.

En-Lai had Dai-Yu moved to a dark room at the back of the house, where two very old servants tended her. For seven years she spoke little, only dwindled away, the skin over her bones as translucent as rice paper, the gestures she made more and more sluggish.

In the end, she caught the lung sickness, and died.

Thus ended her first life.

- - -

Interlude: Tenth Court of Hell

The soul comes before the Wheel for its first rebirth. But the Lady does not move. Her hands are empty.

"Why?" the soul asks, and its voice is a mere whisper.

"You cannot drink. You must remember," the Lady says. Her face is emotionless. "You must answer them."

The soul's face is indistinct; if it had any expression, it would be anger. "Never," it says.

"You have no choice." The Lady's yellow sleeves billow in the wind, beckoning the soul onwards. "Come, child. There is another life awaiting you."

- - -

3. *Wen-Min Empire, 343-631 years after the Founding*

Thus, in every life, Dai-Yu was born knowing everything, from her first birth to her last. No more childhoods of innocence, no more days free from fear. In every life, she dreaded that Tiger and Crane would come back and ask the question.

They did not always come, but, when they did, they destroyed everything. Tiger killed her family. Crane had them arrested, or aroused in them the desire to fight on the border: they took up the swords of soldiers, and came back wounded and silent, or not at all.

A reminder, Tiger said.

Think of the Empire, Crane whispered. Can you leave it to crumble because of a caprice?

And they had been right—they were everywhere: in the eyes of merchants in the marketplace; in the faces of priests as they said their devotions; in the judges and clerks at the tribunal, passing through all of them like dark, beating shadows.

She could not escape.

But she would not yield.

- - -

4. *Shunliu (Wen-Min Empire), 650 years after the Founding*

When she was fourteen, Yi-Sen, who had once been Dai-Yu, was given in marriage to Zheng Lei, first clerk of the tribunal in Shunliu.

She had two sons, and obsessively watched each of them in his cradle. And when the hot storms of summer came, she moved to the nursery and spent the nights watching over her children.

Her husband Lei had his own quarters, but servants' gossip did reach him, in the end.

He asked her into his study one night. Yi-Sen came hesitantly, tiptoeing past the shelves crammed with books—her husband's study was his preserve, a scholar's haven in which women had no place.

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Lei was sitting at his reading table, which was bare save for a writing brush and a lantern. He raised his gaze to her. "You must be wondering why I've asked you here."

"Yes," Yi-Sen said. Bluntness, her parents had told her more than once, was no quality for a woman. But even an army of tutors had not been able to take it out of her.

"Sit down," Lei said.

She pulled over a chair, and sat before him, waiting for him to speak. At last he said, "Yi-Sen. I'm no fool. What do you fear?"

Her heart missed a beat. "What do you mean?"

"Don't toy with me. I've seen the way you watch shadows. Men guilty of some unpunished offence look the same when the militia passes their way."

"I—" Yi-Sen hesitated. She had kept the secret of her past lives, of the mark in her hand, like a miser hoards his gold and jade.

In Lei's eyes was nothing but a mild curiosity.

"You won't believe me," she said.

"I'm a scholar. Let me be the judge of what to believe."

"My name is Dai-Yu," she said. "I was born in the year three hundred and one. I am the child of the promise."

It all came spilling out of her, then, the stories of Tiger and Crane, of the boy dead in his bed, the gaping wound in his chest, of the other dead in her past.

Lei's grey eyes watched her, judged her, just as Tiger's and Crane's eyes had. He said, finally, "I would like to believe you've invented all of this."

"But you don't?" Yi-Sen asked. She had expected many things, but not that.

Lei said, slowly, "You can't read. You're no scholar. And yet... yet you've told me things from the past. Details that are true. I've read them in books."

"I didn't learn them," Yi-Sen said. "I remember. Always."

His gaze was on her, and did not waver. "I believe you do."

"Thank you."

"It's not an easy fate. Nor an easy choice."

"You don't understand," Yi-Sen said. "Why should I choose? Why should I grant anything to them?" Her voice was rising, spinning out of control: she heard herself say the words from a faraway place. "They bring nothing but pain and sorrow."

"The Founders lived in a harsh time. I'm not excusing them," Lei added, raising a hand to check her. "I'm just giving you information to understand them."

"I don't. They're not human."

"Not any more," Lei said. "There are tales about the things that do not die, that keep ageing, that never descend into Hell."

They're not pleasant stories." He rose, came behind her. His arm settled around her shoulders. She rose in turn, faced him in silence.

"Yi-Sen.... This is where I'll fail you. I'm a minor scholar, not a warrior or a conjuror. I can't help you."

"It doesn't matter. No one can stand against them, can they?"

"It would take an equal to resist them. But there is no one in Wen-Min who has their power. Yet I would stand by your side, if need be."

"Why?" she asked. "Why would you go to such trouble?"

He spun her round to face him. "Haven't you guessed?" His voice was mild, seemingly emotionless, but a bare quiver betrayed him.

"No," Yi-Sen said. "No. Please don't. They—they take everything I love. They use it against me."

"You said it yourself. No one can stand against them. If that's the case, then nothing truly matters."

She raised her hand, traced the outline of his face, both familiar yet utterly alien to her. "I won't lie to you," she said, softly. "It matters to me. To know I'm not alone."

"You'll never be alone again. I promise."

She stared away from him, knowing this was a promise he could not keep. "Tell me. What would you choose, if you had to?"

"Neither," Lei said. "And yet how we need them, to keep us together. Duty. Fear. But what they have become.... Can you choose between the storms and the flood?"

She had no answer.

After a while, he moved away to extinguish the lantern. "I'll look in my books. I may find some things in the old Annals, something you can use against them."

Although she did not believe he would find anything, Yi-Sen nodded. "You're a good man."

He gave a bitter laugh. "No. I know all my flaws. Do not flatter me."

"I don't flatter," she protested, but he was already leading her away from the reading table.

"Come," he said. "For this night at least, let us forget them."

- - -

5. *Shunliu (Wen-Min Empire), 657 years after the Founding*

Yi-Sen stood on the highest floor of the house, watching the streets go up in flames. Peach blossoms fell everywhere like rain, and she wondered whether she saw truly, or only mistook embers for flowers.

A shadow fell across the doorway. "Dai-Yu," a deep voice said.

Crane. She did not turn around. She knew what he had come for. "That's not my name."

"It was your first name. It is your true one." Crane came closer to her. He smelled old, like dead books, the same smell the magistrate had had, all those years ago. "Your husband is dead, Dai-Yu."

She had known it as soon as she heard his voice. But still, cold flared in her chest, then spread to every part of her until she felt nothing any more. "And his blood is on your hands. You sent him to defend the tribunal, knowing the mob would kill him."

"He only did his duty," Crane said, his voice heavy with malice. "He was first clerk of the tribunal. He had to bar the mob's entry, to stop the riots."

"He chose nothing," she said. "He was your toy."

"Had you chosen, he would still be alive."

Rage filled her. "If I had chosen? Did you think to force my hand? Did you think I would tell you that you were in the right, and Tiger wrong?"

Beady eyes shone in the shadows: amused, perhaps. "It is time to choose. Your husband is dead. Will you leave your children to inherit this world, this mad world where rioters can take everything away from you?"

"Do you think I care?" she asked, softly.

Softer footsteps echoed under the ceiling of the room. She heard Tiger's voice behind her. "Your husband is dead, Dai-Yu. Do you wish to meet the same fate?"

She said nothing. There was no longer room in her for fear. Below her, the city glowed red with fire, resounded with the cries of the mob as they lynched every clerk they could find.

"Choose," Tiger said.

Crane's hand on her shoulder tightened its grip. "Choose."

Storms and floods, Lei had said. How to choose between them?

Choose.

Lei was dead, trampled by the mob, all because he had fallen in love with her. She could have wept, but it was not what she needed. She needed to fuel her rage. She needed to gather her courage.

"I told you," she said. "I won't choose. I won't let you force me."

"You have nowhere to go," Crane said.

"Give us our answer," Tiger added.

No escape. There was no escape from them, not ever.

But there was a place where neither of them could go.

"Find someone else," Yi-Sen said. And, before she could lose her courage, she leapt in one fluid gesture from the open window.

It was only three floors, but her fall seemed to have no end. When she did land, splayed like a puppeteer's broken doll, pain spread everywhere, in her arms, in her chest, through her heart. Her face was turned towards the sky, and the peach blossoms fell over her like rain.

She could not see Tiger or Crane.

When the darkness came for her, she was smiling.

- - -

Interlude: Tenth Court of Hell

The Lady watches the soul come, and stop before her.

"Another life," she says.

The soul does not move. This time it says nothing, which, of course, does not mean it feels nothing.

"You should know you cannot stay forever in Hell," the Lady says. "You committed no sin. You did not cheat, or lie, or abuse your power. You earned nothing but a brief respite."

"Even a few years is enough."

"You cannot escape forever," the Lady says.

"No," the soul says. "It doesn't matter. Just don't send me where Lei went."

12

"Child, he is not here. He was a virtuous man, and he has earned a stay in the Southern Paradise before his next life."

The soul remains silent for a while. The Wheel turns.

"I am glad. Our paths won't cross again. Things are as they should be."

For the first time, there is pity in the Lady's voice, barely audible. "Dai-Yu. Give them what they want. You are nothing."

"I'm the child of the promise," the soul says. "My power is in making a choice. Or in failing to make it. I won't relent. Life after life, they destroy me. They kill those I love, as they killed Lei. I owe them nothing."

"They are fighting," the Lady says. "In Laijing, the policies from the Imperial Palace are growing more incoherent."

"So?"

"There are those," the Lady says, "who will know how to take advantage of strife. Those who have waited long enough to topple Wen-Min."

"Yes. But I don't care."

"You should," the Lady says. A wind blows, carrying her words away. "It is time, child. Come."

And then it starts again, all of it.

- - -

6. *Wen-Min Empire, 701-987 years after the Founding*

She ran. She did not allow herself to love, or even care for anyone. There had been enough deaths.

She became a hermit, endlessly travelling the roads of the Empire. On her travels, she made acquaintances, never keeping them for more than a few moons: merchants on their way to make a fortune; soldiers going to the boundaries to defend against the Hsiung Nu; families made homeless by famines, floods. As the outer edges of the Empire became lost to the Hsiung Nu hordes, she met refugees flung on the roads with nothing but their clothes, people with haunted faces who would not speak about their past.

Even if she made the choice between Tiger and Crane, it would not help them. That would merely replace the Emperor with a tyrant, a power unchecked by any other. She had seen what Tiger and Crane could do. She had learnt to fear them. She hardened her heart, and moved on.

But, no matter how far she went, Tiger and Crane always found her, always pressed her for an answer. And always she took her own life rather than choose.

A brief respite, the Lady had said. But even that was better than nothing.

- - -

Interlude: Tenth Court of Hell

The souls meet before the Wheel.

They do not come from the same place. One, the elder, has come through the Nine Courts of Hell. The other has had fewer lives, for, in a former incarnation, it was found so virtuous it earned a stay in the Southern Paradise. And now the stay has ended, and it must be reborn. It has asked for only one thing, and this request was granted.

The Lady knows this should not be happening. But where there are rules, there are exceptions. Not many things can sway the Judges of Hell, but devotion and virtue always find their reward.

"Dai-Yu," the younger soul says.

The elder of the souls does not move. It looks at the other soul, trying to make out its features. Finally it says, its voice shaking, "Lei? You shouldn't be here. You should have forgotten."

"I am where I need to be," the younger soul says. "Listen, Dai-Yu."

"No—stay away from me. Crane killed you the last time, just for being my husband. How can you even think of coming here?"

"Dai-Yu," Lei's soul says. It reaches out with a translucent finger, tenderly. "I made a promise. I am here."

"You can do nothing. Stay away. Please. Be reborn in some place where I won't have to meet you."

"I did something for you," Lei's soul says. "In the Southern Paradise is a library that holds every book ever printed in Wen-Min. I went there, and searched. You are the child of the promise. But did you ever ask yourself who promised you to the Founders?"

The silence, this time, has an almost palpable quality.

"We have forgotten," Lei's soul says. "Tiger and Crane rewrote the histories to make us forget." Its voice takes on a singsong quality. "'Three philosophers founded the Empire, in a time so far removed that all that remains are myths written on crumbling bamboo strips. And, as philosophers are wont to do, they fell out.'"

"Three...." Her soul's voice is a mere whisper.

"Crane, Tiger," Lei's soul says. "And Tortoise. He wouldn't choose, Dai-Yu. He wouldn't be the arbiter between Tiger and Crane. So he withdrew to the highest mountain in Wen-Min, but not before promising them there would be a child."

"I," Dai-Yu says.

Lei says nothing.

"I need to find him."

"You won't. Because he would not take part in the future of the Empire, he was thrown out of it. He became a hermit, wandering on the roads of Wen-Min: a monk answering to no one—"

"A beggar," Dai-Yu's soul whispers.

"What?"

"It's nothing. Thank you, Lei."

"You don't have to thank me," Lei's soul says. "Dai-Yu—"

Their souls brush, part. Something has been exchanged: a kiss, if souls could kiss. A promise, perhaps.

Lei's soul takes the celadon cup from the Lady's hands, and drinks. Its light is fading away now, its memories scattering. Dai-Yu's soul stands by the side, quivering. It does not drink from the cup. It never drinks. For the first time, it occurs to Dai-Yu that it is a blessing, this remembrance.

The Wheel turns, taking its load of souls back into the world of flesh.

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7. *Mount Xu (Wen-Min Empire), 1021 years after the Founding*

There was a temple on Mount Xu. It was not one of the Five Great Temples, not a place where pilgrims would endlessly flock, seeking salvation amidst clouds of incense.

The temple at Mount Xu was a mere pagoda of three storeys. Its slanted roof was made of lacquered wood, ungilded.

It was to this temple that Dai-Yu came, after years of searching; years spent on the roads, from her native city of Yaoxin to fertile Shandong in the South, from windy, arid Menzhou in the East to Laijing, the capital at the centre of the Empire.

The air was warm, promising the sweetness of summer, and pink cherry blossoms littered the path. Dai-Yu, pausing on the last rise, inhaled, and felt the serenity of the place fill her bones, as if all her life had been leading her here.

There was no one within the pagoda. The path went on, into the gardens, and then deeper into the mountains.

The beggar was waiting for her at the end, sitting in meditation before a waterfall in the shadow of pine trees. It was the same man Dai-Yu had met so many years ago: the same man, with

the missing leg and iron crutch, with the rheumy eyes that pierced her soul.

"Dai-Yu," he said, when she came closer. "Child of the promise."

"You knew I would come," Dai-Yu said, angrily. Had she been led here, manipulated since the beginning like a puppet on its strings?

"There are not many mountains in Wen-Lin," the beggar said. "And I have not moved for many years." He rose. "Come, child. Let us walk."

"How could you?" Dai-Yu said. "How could you promise me to them, to make the choice you didn't have the courage to make yourself?"

"They were children. Grasping for what they couldn't have." Tortoise's eyes turned to the waterfall endlessly pouring its water into the misty pool. "There is no choice."

"Not choosing is a choice."

"So is running away," Tortoise said. "So is suicide."

These references angered her. "You accuse me?"

Tortoise shrugged. "I don't know, child. I can't tell you what to do, for I never could find out. There isn't much time left."

The sun had sunk below the cover of the trees; already the forest was darkening. Cold spread within Dai-Yu's bones. "They are coming," she said.

"Yes," Tortoise said.

"Why?"

"They knew you would come to me, eventually. They knew the moment you entered this temple, the moment we finally met. For you are the child of the promise," Tortoise said. "My child."

It rang true. And yet it was impossible. "No—I have...I have parents. I have a human soul. I remember well enough."

Tortoise reached out, traced the mark on her hand. It sent a tingle of heat up her arm, as it had done, an eternity ago, on the road to Yaoxin. "I made you," he said. "Who else could have chosen in my stead? Who else would not have to drink the Brew of Oblivion in the Courts of Hell?"

"No—"

"You are the breath from my breath, the flesh from my flesh, the seed from my seed. Dai-Yu—"

The darkness was almost complete. A cold wind rose, scattering the pine needles on the ground, whispering words of mourning. And Dai-Yu, staring at her maker in the dim light, saw fear in his eyes, and the sallow cast of his skin, and understood that he would not help her, that he had long since forgotten his power. That he, too, was nothing compared to Tiger and Crane.

"No," she whispered, but the wind carried the word away.

Two shadows coalesced at the heart of the darkness. Dai-Yu watched them take on substance, transfixed.

"Dai-Yu," Tiger said, in a feline growl. "It is time."

"Choose," Crane said.

Wind whipped at Dai-Yu's sleeves.

Tortoise still stood frozen beside her. "Leave her."

Tiger laughed. "Too late, brother. You relinquished your mantle to her. Now she must do what you could not."

"Tiger—" Tortoise said, moving to stand in front of Dai-Yu.

A hand flashed, shining like metal in the darkness. Tortoise fell back, one hand going to his chest, then rising to his face. Blood dripped from it onto the ground, one drop at a time, a soft patter, like rain.

Dai-Yu felt the cut as if it were in her own chest; she stumbled, gasping, then tried to stand.

"My child," Tortoise whispered. Time slowed, stopped; in that single moment when Tortoise reeled back, she heard the words he was not saying.

Not choosing is a choice.

So is running away.

Fear is a choice.

Dai-Yu, staring at Tortoise's shocked face, felt a cold certainty rise within her. She moved until she stood before him, seeing the gaping hole in his chest, the same hole Tiger had once opened in Pao's chest.

She remembered Lei's words: *It would take an equal to resist them. There is no one in Wen-Min who has their power.*

Yet Tortoise had been their equal, once. The power was still within him, but fear prevented him using it.

"Breath from my breath," she whispered. "Flesh from my flesh." And, more slowly, "You have relinquished your mantle."

She laid a hand on Tortoise's chest, plunged it deep into the wound until she felt the heart beating under her fingers, the

sticky heat of it on her skin. Warmth spread up her arm, into her chest, through her whole body, until she shivered with the same rhythm.

Flesh from my flesh.

The warmth rose within her, stronger and hotter. Under her spread fingers, Tortoise was fading, crumbling away to nothing, to dust carried by the wind.

Breath from my breath.

There was nothing where he had been: only dust; only a memory, already fading.

Seed from my seed.

Every part of her tingled now. She turned, slowly, and made her way to Tiger and Crane, facing them for the first time in centuries.

"Tiger," she said. "Crane."

All her lives she had run away from the darkness, never once thinking that shadows, undispelled, only grow. She stared at both of them now, shivering, but not with fear. She was their equal.

She raised her hand.

Light sprang up, throwing into sharp relief their faces: the lined, wizened masks of old men; the pale skins of things forever living in shadows.

There was a smell, a musty smell like books left too long untended.

"You are children," she said.

"No," Tiger growled, but in the light he was no longer as frightening as he had been.

"Think of the Empire," Crane sighed.

They were smaller, now, as if the light had robbed them of their majesty; smaller, and ever dwindling.

What would you choose? she had once asked Lei.

She could still remember his answer. *Neither. And yet how we need them, to keep us together.*

He had been wrong.

Old, dead things. Things that did not die, that keep ageing. Things no longer needed.

"I choose," Dai-Yu said. And, bending, caught both of them in her hands. "None of you. Let the Empire rise or fall on its own terms."

They weighed nothing: a leaf; a breath; a length of silk. They shrank under her touch, shrieking their rage in tinny voices, dwindling ever more until they finally fell silent.

In Dai-Yu's hand was nothing but coldness, and then even that was gone.

She stared at her trembling palm, then at the darkness all around her that distorted the pine trees into demon shadows.

"It is ended," she whispered, and did not know whether to smile or laugh. Tortoise's power coursed within her, begging to be used, to shape things as they should be. But she, who had seen what power could do, quelled it.

She saw, for the first time, the life that would be hers: free from the shadow of fear; free to make her own choices, to love and be loved in return; to raise her children in peace. Free at last, she thought, with a smile.

She walked away from the pool, her hands as empty as when she came, seeing the paths of her future before her, like so many flowers she could pick.

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Epilogue: The Wheel

In the Tenth Court of Hell, the Lady waits before the Wheel. To every soul that passes she hands the celadon cup, and watches them drink until every memory has scattered away.

There is no exception.

Not any more.

Salad Days

E. H. Lupton

"Melissa? How was your run?" Mama calls when she hears me come in the back door.

"Fine." I run the water in the sink for a minute, then splash it on my face. I'm warm from the run and the cold on my skin feels delicious. I close my eyes.

"How far did you go?"

"Three miles, maybe." I walk through to the living room, drying my face on the dish towel. Mama is on the sofa where I left her, in the corner with her legs stretched out as though the chintzy floral print is about to swallow her. The TV is on but muted, showing something blurry, dark figures and light. I find my glasses on the bookshelf and it resolves into another anonymous judge program; a 'defendant' is pleading silently with a stern-faced woman over what the subtitle says is a matter of a vandalized car.

"You were gone for three hours," Mama is saying. "You must have gone more than three miles."

"Maybe." My glasses start to steam up from the heat of my face, so I take them off and polish them on the hem of my shirt.

"Did you just go somewhere and set for three hours?" Mama asks. "You don't look like you been settin'."

The fog swallowed up the streets early on, and I was reduced to running with arms outstretched, waiting for the slight dip which signaled the transition from sidewalk to street, trying to find the pole with the street name on top, though without my glasses it was an exercise in futility to try and read what it said.

I once clocked myself on a track, back in high school, and figured that it took me about ten minutes to run a mile. I'd run with my little digital watch timing me, clicking off the distance step by step, minute by minute. Then the watch broke and I never bothered to replace it, and in the fog my runs turned into long stretches of impenetrable sameness, nothing to differentiate the miles to my weary, blurry eyes. As I cast my mind back, all I can remember are the first few steps, the moment when I turned around, and putting my hand on the knob of the back door. I bent down to take the doorkey off my shoelaces and the ground was

cold beneath my knees. I have to lock the door or Mama will forget and get distracted and wander off.

The rest of the time has faded away.

"I haven't been sitting," I say, and turn off the TV. "Did you eat?"

"I was waitin' for you." She says it like she was waiting for the pleasure of my company, and not because she forgot or because we instituted a strict 'no knives' policy after a gory accident a few weeks back. She picks up her cane and struggles to her feet. I watch for a moment, then turn and go back into the kitchen.

"What do you want?"

"I don't like you out there running without your glasses in the dark. Who knows what could happen to you."

I start to get out the ingredients for salad. It's the only thing she eats anymore. Mixed greens, tomato, onion, bell pepper, cucumber, mushrooms, cheese, croutons, half a hard-boiled egg, anything I can think of to add a few more calories now she's getting so thin. "I told you, Mama, I can't take my glasses. The fog would just make them all blurry."

"Well I don't like it," she says.

"Of course you don't." They sell prebagged salads at the store, but I like to make them by hand. "What kind of dressing do you want?"

"The red one."

I wrap up the leftover piece of onion in tin foil and stick it back in the fridge. There are thirty half-bottles of salad dressing, and I try to figure out which one she means. "Cranberry?"

"No."

"French? Italian?" It's pinkish, which is almost like red.

"You know I don't like none of that Eye-talian stuff."

"You liked it well enough last week, Mama." The sun-dried tomato basil is really olive oil with red tomatoes suspended in it. I rummage around. "Salsa?"

"Salsa ain't salad dressing, and you're just tellin' me that because you know I don't remember." She gets up and limps over to the refrigerator and picks out a jar. "This one."

"Mama, that's kimchi." *My kimchi*, I want to say, one of the few indulgences I allow myself these days. I don't, because I don't want to hurt her feelings. Instead I say, "You don't put it on salad. It's pickles."

"Well I like it on salad," she says, and opens the jar to spoon some into the bowl I've put together for her. "I guess I'm just different."

"I guess so." I watch her re-cap the jar and pick up the bowl with the hand that doesn't have to be on her cane, the barest of shakes betraying the effort. "Did you get any sleep while I was gone?"

"I closed my eyes for a bit," she says, but I know it's not true and she's just saying it not to hurt my feelings.

Mama hasn't slept in months.

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The disease is called Fatal Familial Insomnia; it's very rare, and it does exactly what it sounds like. It's an inherited prion disease, a dysfunction of proteins in the brain, a small blip on an otherwise unremarkable stretch of chromosome twenty that makes it run rogue. Historians have dated it back to the mid-1700s when a wealthy Venetian doctor passed it on to his ten children before he died of it. Some of them must have escaped, of course—the likelihood of passing it on to a child is only fifty percent. But whichever one my family tree descended from was not so lucky.

By the time they came out with a test for it, in the late nineties, Mama already had three kids and was pregnant with me, her fourth. She'd just watched her father die of it a few months earlier, and the horror was fresh in her mind when she went in to get tested.

When she got the thin envelope, she wanted to have an abortion. My father, her second husband, who liked children and wanted some of his own, talked her out of it. He would be around to look after the baby; there was a fifty percent chance that I *wouldn't* inherit it; he'd take care of her when she got old; she might die in an accident or get cancer and never live to see the gene come to life. Better, there was always the chance that carrying the gene wouldn't lead to FFI at all; I don't know the statistic on that, but I know it's possible. There were fifty reasons to keep me, and only one reason to pull the plug.

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Mama asked her other children not to get tested. I have two older half-brothers, Henry and William, and a half-sister, Lynn. Henry was twenty-two when all this started, William two years younger, and Lynn not quite nineteen, and they all ignored her edict and got tested anyway. The only thing Mama could do

was keep me from getting tested. She couldn't bear the feeling of having brought me into the world only to let me die.

And life continued until I was twenty-one, and she and Papa were in a car wreck that killed him and left her with a bad limp on her left side. She was fifty-nine.

A year later she woke up in the middle of the night, sweating, and couldn't fall asleep again. She dozed a bit, turning fitfully somewhere between sleep and life, and then on towards morning, when the fog crept up around her window and closed in to smother her, she called me.

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"Four hours," Mama says a few days later when I come in. She's sitting in the kitchen painting, one of the few activities she can still manage. I splash water on my face and go to retrieve my glasses. "You must've done more'n three miles," she says when I come back in. "Even if you only ran one mile an hour."

"Four miles," I say. It's starting to rain outside, which will drive the fog away. I look out and see that I've stupidly left the laundry out on the clothesline, so I go out to get it.

"You'll sweat on it," Mama says, frowning, when I come in with an armload of towels.

"I'll sweat on them eventually anyway," I tell her, taking off my glasses to wipe them off.

"Why don't you get contacts?"

I shrug, pulling the spinach out of the fridge and putting a big handful into a bowl. There's a loaf of bread in the freezer, and I pop a couple slices of it into the toaster for myself. "They hurt my eyes."

She watches me closely to see if that's the real answer. I don't let her see through to where the answers live.

"Do you want kimchi on your salad again?"

"Damn it, Lynn, if it's too expensive you should say something."

"How about ranch?" Ranch dressing is loaded with calories.

"I got some money saved up."

I rub the back of my shoulder, where the muscles are starting to tighten. "I'm not Lynn, I'm Melissa." When I stand up and close the fridge, she's looking at me suspiciously, as though I might have

changed from one daughter to another just to spite her. "How about Italian today?"

- - -

On the phone, Lynn's voice is tinny and far away. It's impossible to tell if she sounds tense or upset when I tell her Mama is getting worse.

"How long?" is her only question.

"I don't know," I say, which is a lie. The disease never takes more than eighteen months to run its course, and we're in month twelve. "Not long. I called the hospice people the other day."

Lynn is silent, but I know she's nodding. Of the three, she was the only one who tested positive for the mutation, and the one who tends to approach the idea of the end with the most calm. I like to make my reports to her and let her pass the news to our brothers.

"You should get tested," she says.

"She doesn't want me to."

"She doesn't have to know," Lynn says. "You could just not tell her."

"Is that what you did with Eric?" I ask. It's a nasty thing to say, but I can't work any rancor into my voice, and by her sigh she can't muster the energy to get worked up about it. She married just out of college, got her tubes tied and promptly adopted two children from overseas. Her husband's an investment banker, and they spend more than half their time traveling, trying to squeeze in twice the life in half the time. I sometimes wonder if she's going to kill herself from jet lag before the time bomb in her head goes off.

"I just think that, in the balance, I'd rather know than not know," she tells me.

"I guess." I lean back in my chair, propping one bare foot against the edge of the kitchen table. It's not quite five o'clock. "I have to go running now," I say. "I'll talk to you later."

"That's all you ever do," Lynn says.

"I like running."

- - -

When I get back, Mama is eating a bowl of lettuce with her hands.

"Didn't you want anything else on that, Mama?"

"Four and a half hours," she says. The woman who can't remember to put salad dressing on her lettuce can remember what time I left and what I was doing. I want to punch something. "Where do you go?"

"I don't know." I make toast, open a container of yoghurt in the meantime. "Around."

"You eat like you went far enough."

Four and a half hours make two hundred and seventy minutes, or twenty-seven ten-minute miles. My legs are aching, the sweat dripping out of my hair and running down my back. It's possible. Or maybe it's just condensation. "I don't really know where I'm going, Mama. I just run until it feels like it's time to go home."

She pushes away the bowl of lettuce and gets up, taking a banana out of the fruit bowl on the table. It's a heartening sign that she's feeding herself, except that she holds onto it instead of opening it, and I wonder if she's forgotten how. "It don't take a genius to figure out there's something going on with that."

"I never took psychology, Mama," I say, putting down the yoghurt long enough to peel the banana for her. She takes it back reluctantly, like a child. Her small hands and stubby fingers don't do much to dispel that impression.

"You don't want to come home."

"I always come home." I take the toast out of the toaster and start to put peanut butter on it. I stretched the food budget last week and got the good type of peanut butter, the one that's just ground-up peanuts and a little bit of salt. "Home's where the food is."

"What will you do when I'm gone?" she asks, setting the banana on the counter. I wonder if she'll remember to pick it up in a minute.

"I'll throw out all the salad dressing," I tell her, and put two more slices of bread in the toaster.

- - -

"Where do you go?" Lynn asks when I tell her the story. It was meant as a humorous anecdote about the progression of dementia, but she takes it as an invitation to pry.

"I just go." The clock overhead is turning towards ten at night, almost time for me to go to bed. Mama's in her room, doing whatever it is she does all night.

"It's so foggy out there, you can't just be running to enjoy the scenery."

I shrug, then realize she can't know. "I see things."

"What do you mean?" Her voice is suddenly diamond-edged, and I know she's thinking how hallucinations are one of the early signs of sleep deprivation. But she's wrong, too. Hallucinations don't usually occur until four months in.

"I like to run without my glasses," I tell her, because the feeling of letting her go on worrying is too much to bear. "My brain interprets whatever shapes I think I see into all sorts of weird things. It's kind of fun." Tall, string-bean-like giants which become lamp posts when I get close; trees which sway and wink at me as I pass by; snaky plesiosaurs out at sea, calling one to another with long, low sighs. A world in which my brain isn't going to magically, suddenly explode from two misplaced amino acids. More fun than watching the Spanish News Network, Mama's newfound fixation. She doesn't speak Spanish, but somehow she's gotten the idea that she can.

"You need to get out more," Lynn says.

"I get out running every day," I say brightly.

"That's not what I mean." There's a pause, the line crackling slightly between us. I wonder where she's calling from.

"It's the best I can do." I'm still hungry, so I pick up the forgotten banana. The peel is browning, but the fruit is still good. There's not much else left worth eating; I'll have to go shopping again tomorrow.

"What about taking some more classes?" Lynn says. "You could go to community college part-time, get a degree in something more useful than history. What *are* you going to do after she's gone?"

"I don't know." I sit down again, tip my chair back, and spread my toes. Maybe I'll buy some more polish for them tomorrow at the supermarket.

"You can't run forever."

"No, just four and a half hours," I say. I don't think she hears me. Instead I say, "I didn't ask for this."

"No one asks to be born," she says, her voice low. "But what we do afterwards is all based on choices, and, Melissa, you're not making any. All you do is drift, day to day. You need to think about the future."

I think about the future after we've said goodbye. The future makes me feel colder and clammiier than the fog ever does.

- - -

Mama gets sick fast, and then she gets sicker and the hospice people come to put her in the home, where they can monitor her more closely. There are only twenty-eight families world-wide with Fatal Familial Insomnia, so I suppose that makes us worth watching.

I don't especially trust doctors, even though Henry went to medical school and William married one. I hate anyone who's too stuck on themselves to admit they don't really know what's going on. It seems to me that more than half the time when someone gets better or dies, the doctors don't really know what happened. They just assume whatever they did is what worked. That's medicine for you: treat a problem, and if it gets better, you were right. Sure, when you're dealing with something like pneumonia, that works fine. What about when you've got something nobody else has, and no one knows how it will respond?

I go to see her the day Lynn flies in to visit. Mama's lying in her bed, wearing her favorite red bathrobe; I don't see immediately where they've put her cane.

"How far did you go today?" she asks, glancing over at me.

"Four or five miles," I tell her.

"You're limping," she says, looking back at the TV. "It must have been a doozy."

Out in the hall, Lynn touches my arm. "You should get tested," she says again.

I look at her, the graying blonde hair, the crows' feet around her eyes. She's just past forty; she's got another twenty years before she gets the all-clear from the weight she's hauling around. Her own weight, and maybe mine as well.

"All right," I tell her.

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The envelope comes the morning of the funeral, and I'm too busy rushing around getting into my dress and combing my hair to deal with it. Afterwards, I come home and flop down on the chintzy sofa, kicking off the awful heels Lynn insisted I wear for the day.

What now? I've spent the morning listening to people I hadn't seen or heard from in months talk about how my mother was a great person; it's the sort of behavior that makes me want to scream, because if they liked her so much, where were they when I had to fasten her in the house to stop her wandering off? Where were they when I had to lock up the knives and tape the stove shut?

It's three o'clock in the afternoon; outside, the sun is still shining, and my time is wholly my own.

I fall asleep. When I wake up, it's past five, and the sun is beginning to trek down towards the shore, two hours away. I get up and change clothes, grabbing a candy bar from a fruit basket some acquaintance sent. On my way back through the living room, I pause, twiddling with my glasses. Bring them, leave them?

The envelope is sitting on the plate I put the mail on every day, as innocent as anything, just waiting for some unsuspecting soul to come and open it, letting out whatever nightmares lie within.

I fold my glasses neatly and put them on top of the envelope, next to my keys. *How's that for a choice, Lynn?*

Outside I close the door and start off to the west at a jog. The fog is going to come in off the sea, and I plan to be there to watch it, a few miles down the road.



Thought Process

Andy B. Clarkson

Fire at the time factory

Jennifer Jerome

Nobody knows how it starts. We bitgirls
sit in neat rows, heads bent over quick hands
making time. Flickering light licks and curls.
We're too busy to notice. Group A bands
hours in flat packs, while B/C sets rafts
for a nest of minutes as round as egg
yolks. They'll all melt. Emmy, our baby, crafts
seconds: one falls and strikes the table leg,
thin sound silver as dimes. *Fire! Fire!*
rises on the heat. We run to the doors—
our fists beat ragged time; splayed hands briar
out, burn on iron. The little one pours
every second she has onto the blaze,
but it's not nearly enough. We need days.

The Dream Reader

Margaret Bashaar

She is all gentleness when she slits the throats of rabbits,
fur warm in her hands. She cuts them open at the belly
to finger the last flutters of their bodies.

It's a surefire way to cure sickness, to make your breath
smell of lavender. There is softness in the crease of her palm,
and seed pearls are in her eyes.

She is a fortune teller who reads dreams and entrails,
made of pebbles and feathers, of the dry things
left behind by summer.

There is a darkness she lives in at night,
all emptiness and void and from it
arise fire and falling

so she hugs sunlight to her chest and it runs
through her veins, spills out of her arms. It makes her back
arch and her eyes glow.

Shadows stretch away from her in all directions. Kneeling,
she presses her palms to the ground and feels all things
living in it, every mole and potato bug.

She whispers spells under her breath in a language
she does not know, old as stone and soft
as moss on her tongue.

They have the power to tame dreams,
to take the wildness inside her, to make her whole.
She has eighty-four thousand names for this,

for the sounds she makes in her sleep, the black smoke
she smells on the wind that bites at her ankles,
blows sparks in her eyes.

Margaret Bashaar

GUD

Traveling

Gatherine Zickgraf

The sky's eyelid breaks open in the east,
where lashes of trees unlace on the horizon.
A star sparks behind me in the cornflower expanse,
beside a fingernail of luminate moon.

Rusty silos wait to launch by the road,
and wires strung on poles hold the fields in.

I want to drop anchor out here behind the
long pine fences, family trees, soft spruce arms.
I'd catch the wind on my porch,
with rose strands of cloud dissipating in the morning.

Soft flesh of atmosphere peels itself back,
and the day sweeps in like waves toward the dunes.

Definitely Us

Brett Elizabeth Jenkins

Sometimes when I'm not doing anything,
nothing at all, it comes to me—you, maybe

a dog too, sitting in the kitchen (it's always
the kitchen), and there's tea. Always tea,

or coffee, but definitely you, and me, and maybe
the dog, and it's early. Morning is coming

in through the curtains, which are yawned
open, but just slightly, and the dog is sleepily

lapping up some water, or else just lying
there in a furry horseshoe, watching us

read the paper, and the funny parts out loud,
or maybe the dog isn't watching us, or maybe,

like I said, the dog isn't there,
but there's definitely us,

and tea, and
maybe a paper.

How to Recover From a Hundred-Year Sleep

Sue Williams

First, open your eyes. You're stiff, of course. Your feet ache when you flex them; the joints *click-clack*. It's nighttime, and the moon shines through the boughs that block your window. Brush the leaves from your belly. Pinch yourself, to check. Sit up, slowly. Get dizzy. Be afraid.

As you cross the room, remember your dreams: wolf eyes in a forest; a cold, dead hart; a crow trapped in a belfry; a burning wheel. Whisper, "I am here," and feel it in on your tongue. Be wary of the shadows on the door.

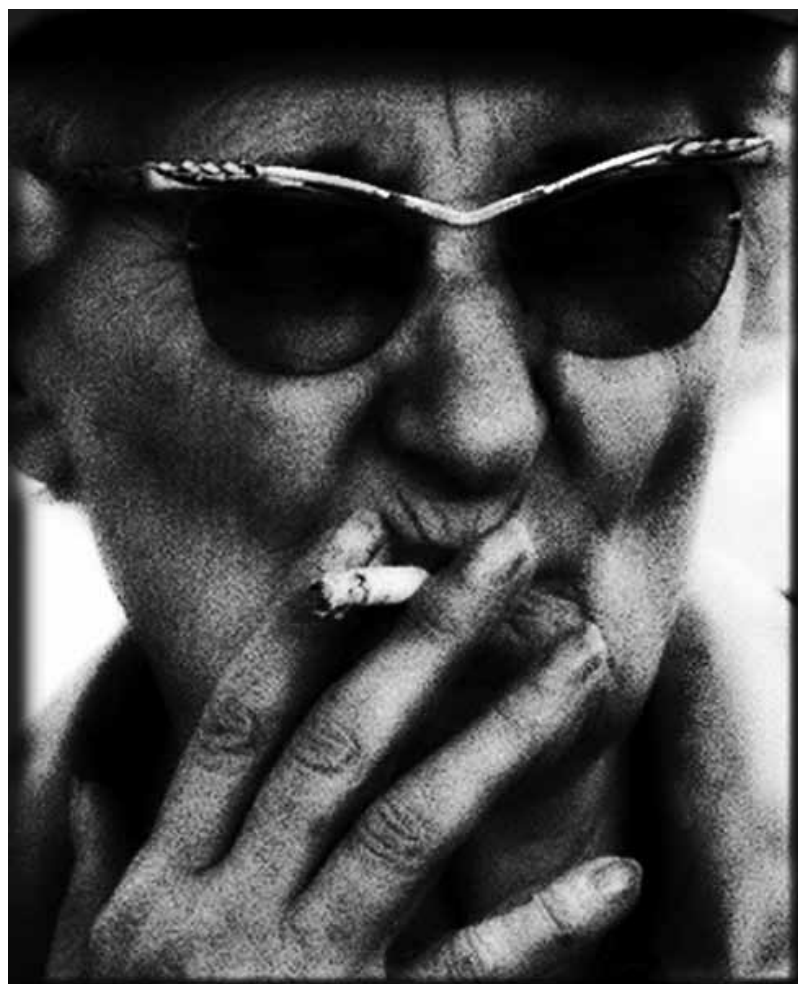
You find the palace corridors filled with root and vine. Don't think too much about it. Ignore the smell of rot. After a while, a twig will catch your hair: pluck it free, wince, and hate yourself a little. Jump at an owl blinking through the dark. Shriek at a bat, and still fear it when it's gone. Then, on the stairs, behind a wall of vines, sicken at the sight of the waxwork maid—she's frozen, holding a mould-green bowl. Beneath a veil of webs, her gaze is sour.

In the banquet hall, they're hypnotized around the long table. The moonlight strokes their faces. Their smiles are skewed. The juggler's palms are empty, but there's triumph in his eyes. The sisters are a tableau among the guests, their lips all sullen, their fingers at their throats. Your father's crown is crooked, his face lost in the dark. Your mother—where's your mother? — isn't there. And your own seat is empty—see, you were upstairs, spinning with a stranger, drawing blood.

They anger you, these people at the feast. You know they look at everyone but you. There are snails on your seat, so you peel them off, drop them, and stamp on them until your cheeks burn. You sit down at last, but still no one sees, so you rise and bash your fists against the wood. Dishes jangle. Goblets fall and crash. "Look at me!" you shout, but they're dead as stone and instead you'll have to look and see yourself. You raise a spoon,

squint through the night. Your image is reversed inside the metal dip: tangled hair, dirty skin—you've changed since you were tricked. You put down the spoon, gaze around the room. Sunrise is playing across the juggler's face. Once again you're tired, and your eyelids droop, and you turn from the banquet like a ghoul.

But you won't return to bed. You've learned enough, for now. Those crow-black dreams made you strong. So you steal your father's sword and lean through a window, hacking at the vines until they give. It will take a while, but you're stronger than you were, and you're ready to escape, at any cost. And once you're out, some prince will claim you, and say that he saved you and woke you with a kiss; and you couldn't care less, because, somehow, you'll break free—you're sure you'll find the answers, in your sleep.



The Smoke

Bob Evans

Again

Molly Horan

Maybe if I'd been younger
Hadn't let my bangs grow out
Hadn't bought the lipstick
Too dark to be a Kool-Aid stain,
It wouldn't sound so horrible:
I didn't cry
I wasn't scared
I ran vocab words through my head
Bowed for a moment of silence

But my lips were cranberry colored
And bangs pinned back
With glitter-free clips

Walking out of school
I heard someone mutter terror
And assumed she'd left the bathroom
With a toilet paper tail

The next day my sister, seven,
A year before vocab tests
Took a crumpled flier from her lunch box
Parents: Turn off the news
Every time the clip plays
Your child will think the planes are crashing again
My mother let the news come on
After Oprah in the afternoons
And whether we went upstairs
Or half-listened
Over the noise of after-school snacks
A convenience-store owner was shot again
A man hid his wife's body again
The Tutsi were being killed again
And I hadn't sung This Land Is Your Land since June
And I hadn't worn my flag shirt since July
And my lipstick melted in the dryer
Maybe I was young enough?

Bridging

Shweta Narayan

Our steel-girdered concrete grabs
their iridescent arc;
interlocks, clings.
Crystal weeps rust.

—but you can walk out
over the abyss
and see fog-white nothing
through concrete.

We drink hyacinth-sweet
cinnamon-honey intoxicant
(beats the hell out of city water)
And their town sparks electric
Will-o'-the-wisps, neon-pink and sulphur,
challenging the stars
(Theirs are hot and turbulent—

like us they say)
They've always seen us lit
by a million fizzing purple thoughts.

But they have pamphlets.

"Harnessed Lightning Is Unnatural
(Storm Giants Excepted)."
Polluted Air Increases The Incidence
Of Allergies, Birth Defects, And
Unseelie Tendencies."

"Their Tools Are Dull:
Our Crystal Tastes No Meaning In Their Girders."

And
 "When I was your age,"
says Mom,
 "We didn't put silver-spotted toadstools in our soup.
 And we didn't have damn immigrants puking
 on the sidewalk either.
When I was your age, pixie dust was for people."

Blue daffodils
grow out of pixie puke
their nectar
 fizzing purple
 scented with mysteries
 And we meet some nights
 at the keystone chimera
 where neon-flickers purple the cliff
 along both sides
 —and we gaze through concrete
 and through living crystal
 at the white-fog canvas
 of our worlds

All You Had

Jim Pascual Agustin

old and under the bridge, a broken
weather vane in your hands
propped up like a naked umbrella,
you cursed
that lovely oleander
waltzing with the wind

pink flowers
gentle curls

your baby's hand
a petal
in that little
mouth

god is cruel to create such bitter beauty
so easily found and grasped

to remind you
every day the past
is a wind twisting away
and all you have is rust

Whale on the Roof

Rose Lemberg

Crossing the bridge of predicaments,
one leg stuck between the planks,
I thought that having a cordless electric lawnmower
and solar panels
would be swell.

My roof is flat, and
there once was a whale on it, red with the dawn,
toothlessly grinning—and grass
grew on its back.

My thug-loving friend
asked if I wanted to borrow
her gas lawnmower.

"It's bad for the environment," I said,
letting the grass grow greener and cover the house and the whale on the roof.

Eventually, the city came
and mowed all the hippie grass down,
fining me a thousand dollars.

The whale was gone—
torn to shreds or dissipated into the sunset,
leaving behind it only a lighthouse
on my roof
to show it the way back.



Rousing the Whirlwind

Runia Kahn

Dispatches From the Troubles

Lou Antonelli

July 12, 1963

Orange Klan Seen as Heroes in AIR Protestant Stronghold

By R.W. APPLE

The New York Times

LONDONDERRY, AIR—It's 9:00 p.m. and the stifling summer air outside is very hazy, but inside O'Flaherty's Cantina the air is even more opaque with cigarette smoke mixed with curses against the administration of President John Kennedy, who is not very popular in this predominantly Orange city of the American Irish Republic.

Protestant neighborhoods in the buffer republic are rife with discontent after President Kennedy issued an order last week banning all July 12th parades this year in a peacekeeping effort. "He thinks he's a better Irishman than we are," said Mike O'Neill, a plasterer who clasped a thick mug of cold dark ale. There were nods all around the table. "We're Irishmen, too, ain't we?" asked another. "Didn't DeValera welcome us with open arms when the IRA gave us 'The Choice'?"

It has been over forty years, but the outcome of the Irish Civil war and 'The Choice' given the Ulster Protestants by the victorious IRA—between 'the suitcase or the coffin'—still rankles.

Orange parades have been common for decades in cities with large Protestant populations, but the growth of the Northern Irish émigré population—and the growth of the 'Marching Season'—led to violence last summer as they passed Catholic neighborhoods that had never been affected before.

July 12 marks the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690—a famous victory over Catholic forces. The Marching Season traditionally lasts from 'The Twelfth' until the Apprentice Boys Parades which are held on the second Saturday in August.

President Kennedy's ban has stirred a great resentment. "The old timers don't like that we've become such a part of the AIR,"

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said Ralph Mikan, a plumber. "They want to go back to when the AIR was all Catholic."

"The Marching Season is the heart and soul of our community," said Nick Counts. "We're just poor hardworking people who are proud of our history."

"Most of us came here without even that suitcase, as the Provos overran our homes," said James Doherty, captain of the pub's Irish football team. "My father didn't have ten pence in his pocket when he arrived. I was three years old and held his hand the whole trip. I barely remember those horrible times." He took a swig of some dark stout. "It's probably better that way, I'd be even more bitter."

Portraits of Ulster loyalist leaders James Craig and Edward Carson occupy places of honor on the wall behind the Wurlitzer jukebox. At the far end of the pub, near the entrance to the restroom (men only, there's none for the ladies) there's a movie poster of Mexican-Irish actor Anthony Quinn breaking his chains in his portrayal of the strongman Zampano from the Italian film *La Strada*. At the bottom, someone has written, in thick pencil strokes, "WE WILL BE FREE!"

Despite being outlawed both in the AIR and across the border in Texas, the Orange Klan is a constant topic of conversation in Londonderry, which is named after what was once an Orange stronghold in Northern Ireland. Inside O'Flaherty's, OK support is openly expressed. "The OK boys are the only people willing to stand up for us Old Northerners," said a man with a blue football jersey who identified himself only as Ronnie. "They give as good as they get. Kennedy wants the Catholics to run roughshod over us."

Behind the bar, taped conspicuously on the mirror, is a Polaroid photograph of John Paisley—elected last year to represent Londonderry to the AIR legislature—with more footballer-looking types making the 'OK' gesture with thumb and forefinger, signifying support for the group. When it's pointed out Paisley himself is not making the sign, Sean Ramus—one of the O'Flaherty regulars in the photo—says, "He don't have to. We all know where he stands."

Although Americans and Mexicans in the two nations that bookend the republic may have been startled by the outbreak of rioting and violence in the streets of cities such as McAllen, Corpus Christi, and Brownsville last summer, the 'boys' at O'Flaherty's say

the resentment had been simmering for years. "The Catholics have always held the whip hand," said James. "When we'd complain about discrimination, they'd say, 'Why not go back to England?' We'd say, 'We came from Ireland, our forefathers lived there for hundreds of years. You can go back to Ireland, it's your people in charge now.'"

"We're as good Irishmen as ever this country saw," said Mike. "We worked hard and we rebuilt our lives. The AIR wouldn't be as good today if it wasn't for the likes of us Orangemen."

More nods.

"DeValera, despite being such a strong Catholic, always played fair with us," said Sean. "He was true to his word, he saw the AIR as a refuge from oppression. And that's all we want."

When reminded that President Kennedy, in his first address before the legislature in March, promised "complete and unquestioning continuity" with the policies of his predecessor, they laughed. "He says one thing, but he does another," said waitress Sheila McWilliams as she brought over another tray of stout and joined the conversation. "All he's done is give Catholics the leg up since he took over. DeValera was fair, he'd appoint the best man for the job, no matter Catholic or Protestant."

When asked whether any of them belong to the OK, they all shook their heads and raised their hands in protestation. "The OK is based in Texas," said Sean. "We really don't know any members, do we?"

Mike pointed towards the mirror behind the bar. "That photo was taken when Paisley was in San Patricio for a fundraiser. There are no OK members in Londonderry," he said, tugging down his lower eyelid with a forefinger.

Behind the bar, Max Rosenbloom listened to the blarney with impartiality. "I'm neutral," he laughed. "I'm Jewish. I'm pals with everyone."

Rosenbloom has been tending bar at O'Flaherty's for almost thirty years. A promising young boxer who grew up in New York City, he earned a reputation as a clever fighter who seldom slugged it out—hence the nickname 'Slapsy', which he grew to resent—and was on his way to a shot at the light-heavyweight title when he made a strategic turnaround and threw some vicious haymakers in a bout with Young Firpo in 1933.

Rather than face possible manslaughter charges, Rosenbloom left for the refuge of the AIR after Firpo died, and settled in the city that was called Harlingen then. "There really was a sense that this place [the AIR] was a refuge," he said. "Everyone was welcome. The Orangemen had started coming in the twenties, but by 1934 there were also people made homeless by the Great Depression all over the place, too. Coloreds, Greeks, Jews like me, everyone, all types." Rosenbloom lamented how he has seen Orange feelings fester over the years. "What happened in their homeland just ate them up," he said. "The fact that the AIR was mostly Catholic only fed that. When Londonderry became mostly Orange, you could tell—by the way people talked and swaggered—how much it had built up."

He remembers the referendum in 1946 that changed the name of the city from Harlingen to Londonderry: "There was a great deal of tension in the air, but Lloyd Bentsen Senior was the mayor then and he said, 'Well, one of the founders' families had been from Holland, and they named it after the city in the Netherlands. Now most of the people here are from Northern Ireland, and if they want to name it for a city where they came from, that sounds fine, too.'"

"That was very diplomatic, and everything turned out fine," said Rosenbloom. "That's also why Lloyd Senior and now his son Junior have been mayor for the past forty-five years—both Danish and Presbyterians!"

Impartial as he purports to be, Rosenbloom understands the frustration of the Protestants. "Across the border in Texas, it's lousy with Baptists, Methodists, and such, people they probably feel more comfortable with. People go back and forth across the border all the time, there's a lot of contact. The Protestants here are torn. In the AIR, they have the Irish culture they love. On the other hand, in Texas they see where it's no handicap to be Protestant."

What is his prediction for the future? He nodded towards the table full of OK sympathizers. "So long as the boys are happy to work during the day, drink at night, and play football on the weekend, things will be fine. They're all bluster."

"Don't let the folks back in New York get all lathered up," he added with a laugh. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that the Irish consider fighting recreation."

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July 25, 1963

Corpus Christi Under Curfew Following Beating Death

By LINDA JANE SMITH

Associated Press

CORPUS CHRISTI, AIR—The Sparkling City by the Sea is somber today after Mayor Anne Armstrong declared martial law following two nights of sectarian riots. The port and largest city of the American Irish Republic entered the ranks of cities torn by sectarian violence Tuesday following the beating death of a Texas tourist, killed for wearing an orange shirt in a Catholic pub.

The massive show of force by the Corpus Christi municipal police—augmented by AIR National Guard troops—seems to have put the lid on the situation, but at a cost of having troops stationed at every significant intersection. "I will do whatever is necessary to show the hooligans on both sides that these disruptions will not be tolerated in our republic's premier city," said Armstrong, who added that an estimated two dozen businesses have been burned out. The mayor's office later tallied up the total destruction at over ten million dollars' worth.

Violence erupted in the city's Orange neighborhoods after word spread that thirty-three-year-old James A. Baker III—a 1957 University of Texas (UT) graduate and an up-and-coming attorney with the Austin, Texas, law firm of Andrews & Kurth—died after a confrontation in a Catholic bar over his orange UT alumnus shirt. Corpus Christi Police Chief Tom Brennan said Wednesday, "Mr. Baker was a Houston native and lived all his life in either Houston or Austin. He apparently was not political at all and had no idea there would be a problem wearing a brightly-colored orange shirt while on a visit to the American Irish Republic."

The University of Texas colors are burnt orange and white.

While dining at Don Pedro O'Toole's Cantina, a traditional pub near the docks, Baker and his wife Mary were accosted by irate American-Irish Republic Army (AIRA) sympathizers.

"Bystanders said the shirt Baker was wearing was very orange and had a very small UT logo, which his attackers apparently didn't see," said Brennan. "Baker had no idea what the confrontation was over, and they resented what they saw as his obstinacy."

The exact details of what followed remain murky, but by the time Corpus Christi police arrived, Baker was unconscious on

the floor of the empty pub with a massive blunt-force trauma to the head. Mary Baker was taken to Spohn Hospital with bruises and scratches, but no life-threatening injuries. James Baker was declared dead at the scene.

Chief Brennan said all the resources of his department will be devoted to finding Baker's killers. "We need to make a statement that, whatever your religious views, we will not tolerate people taking the law into their own hands."

Violence began in predominantly-Orange neighborhoods in Corpus Christi by 10:00 p.m. that night. A number of Catholic-owned businesses were firebombed overnight, and the entrance to the Orange neighborhoods of Flour Bluff and Annaville were barricaded with burning tires.

Chief Brennan said his department had over fifty emergency calls. Dawn saw the violence stop, but, last night, after fights and fire bombs began to erupt again, Mayor Armstrong made her martial law declaration at city hall.

Funeral arrangements for Baker are pending in Austin.

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Aug. 12, 1963

The Times of London

President Kennedy Seeks to Quell Sectarian Violence

By DONALD WOODS

Special Correspondent

LONDONDERRY, AIR—President John Kennedy went to the heart of the émigré Northern Irish Protestant community today in an attempt to quiet the rising tide of sectarian violence that threatens the stability of the one-hundred-and-thirty-year-old republic.

Speaking at the Londonderry City Hall amidst extremely heavy security, President Kennedy said, "The efforts to cause a bloody civil war will not succeed. The American Irish Republic will remain a progressive and tolerant nation, one which respects and protects the rights of all its citizens, Catholic and Protestant alike."

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Making an obvious reference to the Orange Klan (OK), Kennedy said, "We have been in talks with the highest levels of the United States government towards the goal of stifling the organisation responsible for fomenting these terroristic acts, working from inside Texas."

Both American President Richard Nixon and Texas Governor John Connally have said they plan a full inquiry into OK operations inside U.S. territory at the request of President Kennedy.

"The American Irish Republic has stood as a beacon of hope since its founding in 1840," said Kennedy. "We will not succumb to brute violence."

Londonderry Mayor Lloyd Bentsen, Jr.—a first-generation Danish Presbyterian—stood with the Irish-Catholic President and reinforced his remarks. "Nothing is as sacred to the spirit of the American Irish Republic as the tradition of tolerance and refuge," said Bentsen. "It is the reason why people from across the globe, including Denmark, the homeland of my father, came here to make their fortunes and live their lives in peace and freedom."

In Washington, President Nixon said Attorney General John Mitchell has been empowered with the resources to clamp down on Orange Klan activity "by any means necessary."

As President Kennedy addressed the approximately three thousand people who came to hear his speech in downtown Londonderry, National Guardsmen also patrolled the streets of Corpus Christi, McAllen, and Brownsville as open civil war threatened to break out between the Catholic American Irish Republican Army (AIRA) and the Protestant Orange Klan. For his part, Texas Governor Connally has doubled the number of Texas Rangers and Texas National Guard members along the AIR border from Uvalde to Corpus Christi.

After leaving Londonderry, President Kennedy traveled to Corpus Christi, where he is expected to speak privately with civic leaders and then tour the parts of the city which suffered the most from the rioting that broke out after the murder of Austin, Texas, attorney James A. Baker III last month.

A total of sixteen people have died during the past month in Corpus Christi, McAllen, Brownsville, San Juan, and Pharr in the violence that has been dubbed 'The Troubles'.

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January 15, 1964

DeValera Says Republic of Ireland 'Set the Stage'

By JOSEPH LEDWELL

The New York Times

EDINBURG, AIR—Despite his eighty-one years, there's still strength in his voice when long-time AIR President Edward DeValera talks about the rising tide of civil strife which tears at the fabric of his beloved homeland between the United States and Mexico.

"It all goes back to the IRA, and how they treated the Protestants when they marched into Ulster," said DeValera. "The Orangemen then became the victims."

DeValera was only forty years old at the time, but already a rising star in the AIR legislature when the Irish Civil War ended with a victory by the Anti-Treaty IRA followed by the forceful annexation of the predominantly-Protestant counties of Ulster into the newly-independent Republic of Ireland.

"When the Republic of Ireland was first proclaimed, Irishmen in the AIR felt both the joy of birth as well as the fear of death," he said. "On the one hand, we were deliriously happy that our ethnic homeland was free of English rule after so many centuries of oppression. On the other hand, we knew the proposed settlement with Northern Ireland meant war."

No Irishman commands greater respect—on either side of the Atlantic—than DeValera, who served his nation for a total of twenty-eight years as president between the Great Depression and the start of the Space Age. DeValera noted during an interview in his home in the Rio Grande valley that he always felt his Irish identity more acutely because he was not born in the AIR or Ireland.

He was born in New York City in 1882 to an Irish mother and a Cuban father, who, after a brush with near-death during a Yellow Fever Epidemic, took his young son and wife to the American Irish Republic in 1885. President Richard Dowling—the leader who guided the transition of the Republic of the Rio Grande after the American Civil War into the American Irish Republic—offered generous land grants to refugees from the homeland; Mrs. DeValera was a native of County Limerick.

Free land and ample business opportunities in the young nation comprising equal parts Catholic Hibernians and Hispanics

made for a "wonderful" childhood, said DeValera. "No boy should have been as happy as I was," he said with a smile.

Even as a child, he was aware of the plight of the Irish in their homeland. "Then it all changed, in 1922," he said. "We were stunned."

Joy over the Home Rule agreement and treaty with England quickly faded when the civil war started, and the forceful incorporation of Ulster into the new Republic of Ireland "changed the whole dynamic of oppression," said DeValera. Now it was the Protestants who were oppressed, and handbills were tacked up in the night suggesting their only alternatives were 'a suitcase or a coffin'.

While some of the Ulster Protestants moved to England, including famous Home Rule opponent Sir Edward Carson, said DeValera, "Many still saw themselves as Irishmen first. We would have been hypocrites here in the AIR to have denied them the same rights as those who came before them.

"With the start of the Great Depression, immigration soared, as conditions worsened in 'Eire' for Protestants," said DeValera, using the term common among AIR nationalists for their ethnic homeland.

Speaking on the verandah of his ranch home set amidst thirty acres of prime real estate, DeValera was firm on placing the blame. "If Rutledge [first Prime Minister Patrick J. Rutledge] had pursued a policy of reconciliation, instead of oppression, then the Protestant majority in Ulster would not have felt compelled to leave.

"Yes, the British and the Orangemen had been cruel, but it was wrong of the Nationalists to return that cruelty in kind. An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind," said DeValera, his lanky frame almost shaking with emotion.

With the Protestant population of the six Northern Irish Counties, historically considered as part of the 'Ulster Plantation', dropping from a majority to perhaps six percent by the end of the Second World War, DeValera—who was AIR President from 1930 to 1954 and again from 1955 to 1959—saw the demographics of his ethnic homeland change drastically. By the time he left office for the second time as AIR president in 1959, Protestants comprised twenty-eight percent of the AIR population. Among the many refugees were the Independent Baptist pastor James Kyle Paisley, with his wife Isabella and four-year-old son Ian, who took the name John upon entering public school in Texas.

John Paisley himself, raised in his father's Independent-Baptist congregation, became a Southern Baptist and graduated from a seminary in Victoria—which had been the capital of the Republic of the Rio Grande when it was founded in 1840. "You can't blame people like the Paisleys for leaving 'Eire' because of the oppression which was handed down to them by Rutledge and the IRA government," said DeValera. "Though I wish everyone had stayed in the AIR and not strayed into South Texas."

As it became apparent the number of Protestant immigrants to the AIR was increasing during the final years of the administration of President John F. Fitzgerald—the current president's namesake and grandfather—the 'Irish Question' became whether the AIR should change its liberal immigration policies to stem the tide of Protestant newcomers. DeValera said he remains proud of his 'Open Door' policy, which won the day—and his election—over hardliner Edward Joseph Kelly in 1930.

Despite his strong devotion to the Roman Catholic Church ("The greatest regret of my life is that I never had the strength of character to forsake politics and take holy orders."), DeValera says the Open Door policy was the only moral stance. "I've probably thought about it at least once a day every day for the past forty years," he said. "But I've never regretted it."

DeValera's shoulders slump and his voice quavers when he's asked his views on the current strife. "This took years and years to develop, and it will take years and years to resolve," he said.

The burden of suppressing the Orange Klan (OK) in Texas lies with the United States, DeValera claimed, adding that he understands Washington has been preoccupied with enforcing civil-rights legislation in the Deep South and stopping the worst excesses of the Ku Klux Klan, but he said President Nixon and the Justice Department must turn their attention to the Southwest and crack down on the OK in its strongholds along the Texas-AIR border.

"The OK is lighting the fuse to what can be a long and bloody war," he said. "That's what Paisley and the OK radicals want, and would mean everything I worked for during fifty years in public office proved worthless."

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January 15, 1964

South Texas City Is Cradle of Orange Klan

By DAVE BOND

The Christian Science Monitor

SAN PATRICIO, TX—Pastor Jim Paisley is as proud of his son as any 'proud poppa'.

The leader of an Independent-Baptist congregation in this South Texas City, he brushes off accusations that his son, John—whose election last year as a militant pro-Orange legislator in the American Irish Republic is widely seen as the opening act of the drama dubbed 'The Troubles'—is radical or even controversial.

"He is as radical as apple pie," said the elder Paisley. "He stands for God, and up for his people. That's what he learned growing up here in San Patricio."

Charles Bloom, editor of local weekly newspaper *The San Patricio Press*, says people such as the elder Paisley can't see the forest for the trees. "They came to South Texas, to an area that's very much part of the fundamentalist Bible Belt, and really don't know what the rest of the world is like, much less the rest of Texas. It's a great place to be a Bible literalist."

The combination of fundamentalism very similar to the hard-line Protestantism which was common in Northern Ireland with the indigenous Ku Klux Klan—an exclusively Protestant group—swirled together in this area to spawn the Orange Klan (OK), which has been responsible for fomenting sectarian violence across the border in the AIR. "It's home grown and down home," Bloom said. "Very common and accepted in some circles."

Unlike the Ku Klux Klan, which terrorizes Negroes in Texas and the rest of the South, the OK is a religious-supremacist group and both sides in the conflict are white. "It is very much an Irish-based group, and they do their own thing," said Bloom. "I've never heard of any cooperation with the KKK. It's more like cross-pollination because the Irish and the Anglos live so close together here."

The Paisley family was part of the flood of Irish Protestant immigrants who came to South Texas and the AIR following the incorporation of Ulster into the Republic of Ireland following the Irish Civil War in 1922. Jim Paisley had been a member of the Ulster Volunteers under Sir Edward Carson, but, rather than follow

Carson to England after the end of the civil war, he took wife Eileen and sons Ian and Harold across the Atlantic to the AIR.

After less than half a year in the AIR, Pastor Paisley realized that, for a Baptist, the religious climate across the border and in the North Bank (of the Nueces River) was more salubrious and he moved his small family to San Patricio.

Harold has followed his father into the clergy and is the current pastor of Montgomery Road Church, which the elder Paisley—now formally Pastor Emeritus—founded in 1926. The current congregation is mostly older people; many young people have migrated during the past twenty years to the AIR and moved to places such as Londonderry, which has become the nexus of a unique expatriate Ulster culture.

Ian—who took the name John when he entered Texas public schools during the Great Depression—is the most famous of those 'New Ulster' people as they are called, and the first to make his mark, after being elected the representative for Londonderry to the AIR congress in Laredo last year. "We are all so proud of what John has done," says his father—who still sometimes calls him the very Irish 'Jocko'—"although it pained me personally he had to beat DeValera's own man to do it." At only thirty-seven, the younger Paisley challenged—and beat—the local political establishment for a seat in the legislature only seven years after moving to the AIR, unseating three-term incumbent congressman John Andrew Bell.

Paisley ran as an independent, but has recently talked about forming his own pro-Orange Party. "I would not bet against my Jocko," said Pastor Paisley. "He's done so much, much more than I could have ever hoped for. I think he's already sizing up that Jack Kennedy and getting ready for a race to be president."

San Patricio was founded in 1829 by the impresarios James McGloin and John McMullen after they received permission from the Mexican government on August 16, 1828, to settle two hundred Irish-Catholic families in Texas. A town site four leagues square, called Villa de San Patricio de Hibernia in honor of Ireland's patron saint, had been laid out by surveyor William O'Docharty. In New York, McGloin and McMullen quickly found settlers ready to leave anti-Irish discrimination behind, and San Patricio was formally established in 1834. When the Republic of Texas Legislature demarked San Patricio County on March 17, 1836, San Patricio was designated the county seat, but its development was hindered

by the disruption caused by the inability of Texas and Mexico to agree on their border, with Mexico asserting it was the Nueces River and Texas claiming the Rio Grande.

The area between the two rivers was declared "unorganized" by the Republic of Texas. In 1840, Mexican General Antonio Canales—seeking to emulate the Republic of Texas—led a secessionist movement that created the Republic of the Rio Grande out of the northern Mexican provinces of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. After a tour of Texas—during which he recruited at least one hundred and forty Anglo volunteers—General Canales organized his army in San Patricio and marched south to engage the Mexican federal army.

A decisive defeat in the Battle of Saltillo, Oct. 25, 1840, led Canales to flee back to the Nueces Strip, where—with the tacit approval of Texas President Mirabeau Lamar—he set up a government of the truncated Republic of the Rio Grande in Laredo. Later Texas Presidents Sam Houston and Anson Jones tolerated the existence of the unofficial buffer state, and, after Texas was annexed into the United States in 1845, that state of affairs continued through the administrations of the first two Texas governors.

The new republic's ultimate security rested on the army reorganized around the remnants of the famous San Patricio Battalion that had escaped the Battle of Churubusco and fled to the Nueces Strip to offer its services to Canales following Mexico's defeat in the Mexican-American War in 1848. In 1850, Texas Governor Peter Hansborough Bell approved an agreement with Canales that new American President Millard Fillmore—distracted by the slavery question and the Compromise of 1850—signed without comment. The Republic's stability increased after San Patricio Battalion leader John O'Reilly succeeded Canales as president upon the latter's death in 1852.

Secure borders benefited San Patricio and nearby South Texas cities such as Alice and Victoria, and they prospered. For its part, the American Irish Republic (renamed in 1867 under the administration of President Richard Dowling) has played its historic role of protecting its own and South Texas's security as recently as 1916 during the raids of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa. It was the comparative safety and security in the AIR during the post-World-War-I era that led to the migration of families such as the Paisleys. The influx of Ulster refugees—into the AIR proper and

South Texas—changed the history of the region forever. "I know it sounds almost sacrilegious," says Pastor Paisley in his office at the Montgomery Road Church, "but it felt like we were coming to the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. A land that God had given us to be safe in."

Nothing fulfills that promise more than the life story of his own son, claims the pastor. "Where else could a boy who came to the New World as a penniless refugee become such a success story?"

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March 17, 1964

Trio Sought in Corpus Beating Death Captured in Border City

(UPI)—AIR President John Kennedy announced today that three men implicated in the July 1963 beating death of Texas tourist James A. Baker III in Corpus Christi have been captured in the border city of Donna.

"The thugs who beat to death this American citizen who was in the wrong place at the wrong time have been captured," said Kennedy.

James 'Jimbo' Smith, 27, Ralph Edgerley Preston, 31, and Patrick Hogan, 23, all of Corpus Christi, were ambushed and arrested in a 'safe house' in a neighborhood across the Rio Grande River from Rio Bravo, Mexico.

"It took three months of determined police work to get this break, but we would have never given up," said Kennedy. "Dozens died in the civil unrest caused by this despicable attack."

Although the disruptions that followed have died down to isolated incidents, the American Irish Republic remains on high alert because of threats of retaliation. "We are braced for whatever may be planned by AIRA sympathizers in the wake of these arrests," said Kennedy, speaking to the press at his official residence in Laredo.

Neither Kennedy nor State Police Chairman Guillermo Ledbetter would discuss what contingency plans are in place. Ledbetter did say the trio's arrest came as a result of undercover work and informants. Smith, Preston, and Hogan had melted into an informal AIRA border underground that usually serves as a smuggling route from Mexico, said Ledbetter. He said he couldn't speculate if they had spent part of the time on the run in Mexico.

The three were in state prison in Laredo at press time and under extraordinarily heavy guard.

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July 3, 1964

The Economist

Mexico Museum Memorialises the Origins of the AIR

By LEANDER PRICE

MEXICO CITY, AIR—"This is where it all began. This is where the American Irish Republic was all began."

Juan Clavo is a guide at the state-run Museo de las Intervenciones—the Interventions Museum—housed in the former monastery of Churubusco, which is today a pleasant neighborhood in the Mexican capital.

In 1848, it was five miles from Mexico City proper, and the scene of the penultimate American victory in the war against Mexico that left the way open to the capital. The Museo commemorates the many foreign incursions onto Mexican soil since its independence, which include 1829 (Spain), 1838 (France), 1862 (France), and 1916 (USA again). Juan's special area of interest is the Mexican-American war and the Battle of Churubusco—where his ancestor, Peter O'Neil from Wexford, fought with the San Patricio Battalion.

The San Patricios were Irish immigrants who fought on the side of Mexico in that war. Many were immigrants attracted by the hospitality offered by the Catholic nation. Many deserted from the U.S. Army because of prejudice and abuse directed against them as Catholics, Irishmen, and newcomers.

His ancestor Peter O'Neil became Pedro Clavo—Clavo being Spanish for 'nail', which is what his name sounded like to the Mexicans, explains Juan—and fought with the famous battalion.

Prior to the final defeat of the Mexican army in the Mexican-American War, the San Patricio Battalion had great battlefield success. They fought in the Battle of Monterrey, Sept. 21, 1846, as an artillery battery, where they are credited with defeating three separate assaults into the heart of the city. They also fought valiantly and played a crucial role in the Battles of Cerro Gordo and Buena Vista, among others.

In front of the former monastery, Juan shows a visitor the location of the bridgehead where—not once, but twice—members of the regular Mexican regiment that had engaged the Americans

in battle hoisted the white flag, only to be shot down by members of the San Patricio Battalion who refused to surrender. "Dalton [Patrick Dalton, second-in-command of the battalion] intended a fight to the death to allow Captain O'Reilly and the rest of the men time to make his way to the Nueces Strip," said Juan.

In the Churubusco convent, after running out of ammunition and fighting hand-to-hand in the halls and rooms of the monastery, the defenders only surrendered when American Captain James M. Smith waved a white handkerchief and offered a truce himself. Out of the one hundred and twenty members of the San Patricio Battalion who had stayed behind, eighty-five survived the battle, including Pedro Clavo and Patrick Dalton. The commander of the defending Mexican forces, General Pedro Anaya, is remembered for famously stating, when Captain Smith asked him to turn over his ammunition, "If I still had ammunition I wouldn't have surrendered!"

Captain John O'Reilly, the leader of the volunteers, had led four hundred of his men away from the monastery the night before the battle, along with the main body of the Mexican Army as it retreated north towards Mexico City and a fallback position. When word reached them the next day of the fall of Churubusco, they knew the war was over, and they began a march that ended ten days and five hundred miles later in Laredo and the ramshackle Republic of the Rio Grande—the historic 'Long March'.

"General Canales welcomed them with open arms in Laredo," laughs Juan. "The gringos were outsmarted!"

"Santa Anna stated after the end of the war," he added, "that if he had commanded a few hundred more men like the San Patricios, Mexico would have won the Battle of Churubusco, and probably the war.

"But the defeat of one nation was the providence of another," said Juan. "If it wasn't for the San Patricios' decision to make for the Strip, the American Irish Republic would not have been founded."

Captured San Patricios who had deserted the American Army after the war had begun—including Patrick Dalton and thirty-six others—were hanged, while the others were branded and sent home, including Pedro Clavo.

"He was my great-great-grandfather," says Juan. "I am proud of him, as all of Mexico is proud of the Batallón de San Patricio."

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August 2, 1964

Murder Suspects Plead Out in Beating Death

By JOSEPH LEDWELL

The New York Times

CORPUS CHRISTI, AIR—The three men accused in the July 1963 beating death of a Texas tourist who wore an orange shirt in a Catholic pub pled guilty today in the National Supreme Court.

Appearing very subdued, James 'Jimbo' Smith, 27, Ralph 'Edgey' Preston, 31, and Patrick 'Paddy' Hogan, 23, all softly replied "Yes" when asked by Chief Justice Ralph Yarborough if they agreed to the second-degree-manslaughter charges. Prosecutor Henry Gonzalez said he recommended the maximum sentence allowed, ten years with no parole. The victim, James A. Baker III of Austin, 33, was visiting Corpus Christi and wearing a burnt-orange University of Texas shirt when he was attacked.

Defense attorney Walter Hudnall said the settlement of the case was in the best interests of all parties. "None of these men entered the pub with the intent to get into a fight, much less commit murder," he said. "It was an unfortunate misunderstanding that escalated into tragedy."

Corpus Christi Mayor Anne Armstrong said she hopes the city, and the nation, can put the tragedy behind them. "We must make every effort to stop the provocateurs who created the atmosphere of distrust that contributed to this tragedy."

While President John Kennedy declined comment on the resolution of the court, Press Secretary Pierre Salinger issued a statement that said, "This administration is committed to cracking down on the operations of the illegal Orange Klan within the borders of the American Irish Republic."

State Police Chairman Bill Ledbetter said AIR forces were being deployed to key neighborhoods in case of outbreaks related to what Orange Klan (OK) sympathizers may see as a lenient sentence. "One positive outcome of this is that, in the course of tracking down Hogan, Smith, and Preston, we developed excellent intelligence on OK operations," he said. "We should see results shortly."

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August 3, 1964

Police Arrest Twenty-four Orangemen in Overnight Raids

By NORMA SAUCEDO

Corpus Christi Caller-Times

In a surprise move that was as swift as it was unexpected, state police arrested two dozen leaders of the Orange Klan underground in McAllen, Corpus Christi, Brownville, and Londonderry last night as part of a massive National Guard mobilization.

State Police Chairman Guillermo 'Bill' Ledbetter, speaking just before midnight in the state capital in Laredo, said the move was designed to show the Catholic majority that "Orange terrorism will not be tolerated."

What had been expected to be a night of riots in cities across the Republic—in the wake of the sentences handed down yesterday in the Supreme Court against the three men guilty of beating to death a Texan tourist who wore an orange shirt in a Catholic bar—turned into parties and celebrations as news of the crackdown spread.

"God bless Jack Kennedy, he's a great man," shouted Don O'Ferguson, 24, a pipe fitter from McAllen, as he stood with a cheering crowd on a downtown street corner.

"We need to stop the Orange Klan," shouted James Patrick Kelly, 18, a student, holding up a sign that read "Arrest Paisley Next!"

The two dozen Orange Klan leaders were identified as....

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August 4, 1964

Paisley Denounces Kennedy 'Oppression'

By LINDA JANE SMITH

Associated Press

LONDONDERRY, AIR—John Paisley, who represents this predominately-Protestant city in the American Irish Republic legislature, angrily denounced the roundup of so-called Orange Klan (OK) sympathizers by the Kennedy administration. "President Kennedy shows his true colors and his blatant prejudice in rounding up innocent citizens solely on the basis of their religious affiliation," said Paisley in a press conference.

As of press time, twenty-four suspected OK members have been transported to Hudnall Prison in Laredo.

"The corrupt and ungodly President Kennedy hasn't a shred of proof to tie these men to any illegal activities," said Paisley. "The only outlaw is a renegade president, who isn't fit to tie the shoe-laces of the man he succeeded...."

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August 13, 1964

Apprentice Parade Leads to Violence

By NORMA SAUCEDO

Corpus Christi Caller-Times

Mayor Anne Armstrong said, "There's no one to blame but myself" for this year allowing the annual Apprentice Day Parade that resulted in rioting and at least fifteen people—both Catholics and Protestants—being sent to Spohn Hospital.

Orangemen were met with rocks, bottles, and taunts as they rounded the corner of Maryland and Margaret Streets—near the Catholic neighborhood of Rowley—fifteen minutes into the parade. Police were forced to separate the two sides after the parade broke up and fighting began in the street.

This year's parades follow an especially tension-filled period of sectarian violence. Local authorities in Mission, San Juan, Pharr, and Alamo all withdrew permission for their parades this year. In cities with Protestant majorities—such as Londonderry, McAllen, and Brownsville—the parades were held Sunday afternoon with little disruption. But in cities more evenly divided, such as Corpus Christi and Mission, there was a heavy police presence.

Mayor Armstrong said she was chagrined that the event got out of hand. "I failed to appreciate how volatile the religious issue has become during the past year."

The Orange holiday, held the second Saturday in August, celebrates the successful defense of the Protestant city of Londonderry (now Doirecholmchille) in Northern Ireland during the 'Siege of Derry' by the deposed Catholic King James II.

In Laredo, President John Kennedy was slated to make a statement this afternoon....

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August 17, 1964

The Other Shoe Drops as Bomb Destroys City Hall in AIR

By R.W. APPLE

The New York Times

PHARR, AIR—The city hall in this Rio Grande community was destroyed by an enormous explosion early this morning following a telephoned announcement made to the police, who cleared the area ten minutes before the blast. Pharr police said the caller at 3:45 a.m. simply stated, "The city hall will be gone in ten minutes." An explosion leveled the two-story building at 4:10 a.m.

The blast rocked the city of thirty thousand and was heard across the river in the much larger Mexican city of Reynosa. Emergency personnel swarmed into Pharr from the nearby cities of San Juan, Mission, and Alamo. The mayor of Reynosa, Mexico, sent police under a cooperative agreement.

There were no casualties. The city hall is closed at night; Pharr's police and fire departments are headquartered separately.

Presidential Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, speaking at 5:00 a.m. in Laredo, said, "The Orange Klan targeted Pharr because the city is one of the most Catholic in the Republic."

Rumors have been rampant recently that the OK planned retaliation for the recent arrests of leaders and sympathizers by the Kennedy administration.

Speaking during a break in the firefighting in downtown Pharr, Fire Chief Donal Johnson wiped his brow. "I guess we all expected the other shoe to drop eventually...."

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September 10, 1964

Scion of Famous Family Vows 'Crackdown' on Paisley

By HUNTER S. THOMPSON

The National Observer

SAN DIEGO, AIR—He's been dead for almost six years, but William Frank Buckley, Sr.—'Judge Buckley' or simply 'The Judge' to most people in Duval County—remains influential through the political machine he founded.

His son, William F. Buckley, Jr., who replaced his father at the head of county government as County Judge, keeps the tradition of political leadership alive, but may be about to add a new twist—moving onto the national stage.

A devout Catholic, Bill Jr. told a group of supporters recently he is thinking of running as president of the AIR next year on a platform of "cracking down on the Paisleys and the OK."

Buckley's sentiments seem to mirror the recent decision of John Paisley—the hard-line Orange congressman from Londonderry—to form his own pro-Protestant political party.

Neither Paisley's United Democratic Party (UDP) nor the traditional opposition, the United Republic Party (URP), is regarded as having a shot at unseating President Kennedy as he seeks a second six-year term in office next year—the Fine Gael, founded by Edward DeValera, has won all presidential elections since 1930—but Buckley's statements indicate the possibility of a fissure in the previously monolithic Catholic political structure. Duval is a heavily Catholic county, and would offer Buckley a solid base if he were to run.

Born in 1882, William Frank Buckley, Sr. moved there with his family when he was one and—except for attending the University of Texas for his undergraduate and law degrees—lived there all his life.

Buckley made a fortune in oil exploration and was elected County Judge in 1926, the year after Bill was born. The elder Buckley served as County Judge thirty-two years until his death in 1958.

Bill Jr. traveled much further for his education—Yale University in Connecticut—but returned home and began to take up his duties in the 'family business'. With his Ivy League education, Bill seems a bit more polished than his gruff father, a subject he jokes about. "I have been accused of using sesquipedalian words," he says with a twinkle in his eye ('sesquipedalian' means 'a foot and a half long'), "but the old boys put up with me."

During an interview in his office at the county courthouse, Buckley says he has been urged to toss his hat in the ring "by good men who feel I would be a counterbalance to that demagogue [Paisley]."

Kennedy is not being vigorous enough in fighting for the two basic precepts of AIR culture, says Buckley. "The AIR as a republic of laws, and the AIR as an Irish culture, which reflects the historical and traditional majority of Catholics in Irish society."

Paisley doesn't speak for respectable AIR citizens, asserts Buckley. "His religious beliefs are heretical and his political beliefs

are subversive. He is using our traditional tolerance to disrupt our society. Paisley is a troublemaker who has some grand design to create conditions for the breakup of the Republic," he says, "and the consolidation of some areas into a rump Orange state, under his control."

Wagging a pencil as he jots in a legal pad, Buckley adds—almost as an afterthought—"Insofar as there are some substantial OK strongholds in South Texas, his megalomaniacal ambitions may also include portions of the United States. President Nixon should have a care."

Buckley says he will make a decision on whether he will run for national office by the end of this year.

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December 11, 1964

Political Prisoner Dies After Hunger Strike

By KENNETH GOODSSELL

New York Herald-Tribune

LAREDO, AIR—A three-month joint hunger strike by a dozen Orange political prisoners in the Hudnall Prison took its first victim Monday as Edgar Poole, 52, of Mission, died of a heart attack in his cell. State Police Chief Guillermo 'Bill' Ledbetter said that, despite his age, Poole had successfully fought off attempts to force-feed him. Preliminary indications are that Poole died of a heart attack caused by the stress of his hunger strike, said Ledbetter.

Poole and the others—known as the 'Hudnall Men'—began their strike shortly after being rounded up during the Kennedy administration crackdown this fall on Orange Klan activities in the Republic.

John Paisley, the radical Orange representative from Londonderry, said the strikers' decision to fast until death "is a reaction to the complete suppression of their human rights."

Paisley, who met with Poole and others during the past month, said, "If they can't live as free men in their own homeland, they feel they might as well die."

In Duval County, Judge William F. Buckley, Jr.—who has criticized the Kennedy administration for not cracking down hard enough on illegal Orange activities—said the news of Poole's death "leaves me cold."

"The hunger strike issue," he said, "is a self-liquidating problem...."

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Jan. 1, 1965

Buckley Forms Anti-Orange Political Party

By LINDA JANE SMITH

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO, AIR—Stating that "Enough is enough," Duval County Judge William F. Buckley, Jr., today announced the formation of the Traditional Irish Party, which, he said, will be dedicated to suppressing the activities of the Orange Klan in the American Irish Republic and taking a hard line against Orange militancy.

"The TIP is a movement around which men of good will and stern morality can close ranks," said Buckley. "The American Irish Republic has a law-abiding Catholic majority, and it will stay that way."

The news of the formation of the new movement was greeted with varying reactions. In Laredo, Presidential Press Secretary Pierre Salinger said, "The administration has no opinion either way on partisan political organizations."

In Londonderry, Mayor Lloyd Bentsen, Jr., who narrowly lost a presidential bid as the United Republic Party candidate in 1959, said, "The only effect of Bill Buckley's efforts will be to make President Kennedy look moderate."

Inside O'Flaherty's Cantina, a downtown Londonderry landmark and Orange stronghold, bartender Max Rosenbloom chuckled. "Any idiot can start their own political party, some idiots do," he said.

Patrons "pfuied" or cursed when asked about Buckley's aspirations. "'E's a cheeky git," said one, without turning from the bar....

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July 30, 1965

Seeing Red while Thinking Orange—Kennedy, Burning Crosses, Double-Crosses, and the AIR

By TOM WOLFE

New York Herald-Tribune/New York magazine

(Somewhere deep in the American Irish Republic)

BANG!

Clack.

BANG!

James 'Jimbo' Kirkpatrick is taking target practice at a 'private club' maintained by members of the Orange Klan (OK), deep in the mesquite thicket along the north bank of the Rio Grande.

He throws the bolt-action back again to eject the cartridge.
Clack.

The target—stuck with a clothespin on a line between two gnarly mesquite trees—looks suspiciously like a silhouette of President John F. Kennedy.

"That's because it is," says Jimbo.

BANG!

His friend and fellow OK member Bubba O'Toole brings over an ice-cold Shiner Bock, brewed in the nearby Hill Country of Texas with an old German recipe. Jimbo takes out his 'church key' and pops off the cap. He takes a deep swig. "Damn, that's good."

Jimbo is a plumber; Bubba is a truck driver. Both are third-generation AIR Orangemen and self-described 'working stiffs'.

"I don't know why people say the OK is such a bad group," says Bubba. "We're just a bunch of old boys who like to drink and relax among our own kind."

Jimbo is dressed in blue denim overalls with no shirt; Bubba wears motor-oil-stained blue jeans and a red-and-black-plaid shirt with the sleeves torn off. He gestures to his arms. "Easier to work under the hood this way."

The Orange Klan says it defends the right of Protestants in the AIR to jobs and equal treatment before the law. Its message is popular with people such as Jimbo and Bubba.

"We're the grunts, we do the dirty work," said Bubba. "We work hard and do all the tough jobs. We need to stand up for ourselves—nobody ever stands up for the little man."

"Yeah, you'd think everyone here before us fought in the San Patricio Brigade," said Jimbo. "The old-timers, the Catholics, look down their noses at us."

One hundred yards away, Jimbo's wife, Betty Sue, is grilling ribs on a barbecue grill. Jimbo gets a sniff.

"You done with the gun?" asks Bubba.

"S'all yours," says Jimbo.

Clack.

Jimbo walks over to the family camper. "Kennedy is really doing us wrong," he says. "He's not such a good Catholic. Everyone knows he cheats on his wife."

"He's a dirty double-crosser," says Betty Sue. "He said he'd treat us equal, like Big Eddie [DeValera], but he just chums up with his own gang."

"DeValera was fair," agrees Jimbo. "But he's old and retired now. We can't count on Kennedy to help us. That's why everyone is joining the OK now. Just last week, we had a fellow join who goes to Presbyterian church."

Jimbo and Bubba have their own campsite away from the main body of OK members who've gathered for the weekend retreat, which features hunting, target shooting, barbecue, drinking, and polemics.

Betty Sue slathers a thick sauce that smells very sweet onto the ribs. "This here is my own recipe," she says. "Two cups of brown sugar per gallon."

Bubba and his 'lady friend' Sheila don't have as fancy a setup, just a shell over the back of a pickup truck. Bumper stickers read, "Honk if you're Orange" and "John FUCK Kennedy". One has kidney-shaped paisley designs on a solid orange background.

"You staying? After dinner, there'll be more preaching," says Sheila.

We first met Jimbo and Bubba at the opening ceremony the night before. They were the two members who left the informal gathering and disappeared into the darkness to come back with a large wooden cross, perhaps ten feet tall. Unlike in the United States, the OK is not against the law per se in the AIR, and no one wears a robe or covers their face. The two men dropped the cross neatly into a hole. It was made of logs heavily soaked with creosote. The smell permeated the circle and the members backed up. The grand master stepped forward with a torch and touched it to the base of the cross. It burst into flames with such ferocity that he jumped back and dropped the torch. He blew on his hands jokingly to relieve the tension as the flames rose up.

"Whoo-ee, lookee that," said Bubba.

"Damn," muttered Jimbo....

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September 8, 1965

Kennedy Gets by with Plurality in Re-Election Bid; Buckley Stuns with Second Place Finish; Bentsen Third

By JOSEPH LEDWELL

The New York Times

LAREDO, AIR—President John F. Kennedy won reelection over a badly-divided field Tuesday, but the real news is that he was held to less than a majority of votes as William F. Buckley, Jr., came in a strong second.

Kennedy and the Fine Gael—the party founded by Edward DeValera that has never lost an AIR Presidential election—took forty-eight percent of the vote, but Buckley, running on the new Traditional Irish Party (TIP) ticket, took a hefty forty percent.

The historic opposition, the United Republic Party (URP) and its candidate, Lloyd Bentsen, Jr., took only seven percent of the vote. Radical Orange supporter John Paisley on the United Democratic Party (UDP) ticket took five percent of the vote.

Political analysts said both Kennedy and Bentsen suffered at the hands of Buckley and Paisley supporters. "Kennedy should have taken at least fifty-five percent of the vote, based solely on ethnic Irish voting trends," said Keith Watson, a professor of political science at Pan-American University in Edinburg. "Buckley obviously made inroads into the Kennedy base."

Observers noted that the fact that two candidates—Bentsen and Paisley—came from the same city and county left the other fifteen counties to be split between Kennedy and Buckley supporters.

Watson said the trend towards polarization shown by the election results is disturbing. "If we evolve into a political system based solely on religious allegiance, we will lose flexibility in government."

Thanking his supporters in Laredo Tuesday night, Kennedy said....

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December 16, 1965

'Christmas Surprise' Angers Orange Communities

By DAVE BOND

Christian Science Monitor

LONDONDERRY, AIR—The home of the largest Protestant community in the American Irish Republic remains under strict

martial law after President John F. Kennedy authorized a massive roundup of Orange Klan members and sympathizers.

Over three hundred people have been rounded up and shipped to the notorious Hudnall Prison in Laredo, over one hundred and eighty miles away, as Kennedy used emergency powers granted him under the AIR constitution to implement a summary detention decree.

Londonderry Mayor Lloyd Bentsen, Jr., who has had effective control of his city taken away from him under another emergency decree, said, "I am deeply saddened and disappointed by the president's actions.

"I thought I knew Jack Kennedy," said Bentsen. "It seems I was wrong. This is not the Jack Kennedy I knew."

Protestant leaders across the Republic denounced what many called "a Christmas surprise".

Key Orange-movement supporters in the Republic were making arrangements to flee into Texas or Mexico to avoid arrest. John Paisley, UDP Congressman from Londonderry, who spoke in Corpus Christi yesterday evening before fleeing across the Nueces into Texas, denounced the roundup in the strongest terms....

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January 6, 1966

AIR Police Head Dies in Roadside Bombing

(UPI) LAREDO, AIR—The Chairman of the American Irish Republic State Police Guillermo 'Bill' Ledbetter and his driver were killed Wednesday as a massive car bomb detonated when they passed by on a Laredo street....

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January 21, 1966

Three More Die in Hudnall Prison Hunger Strike

(UPI) LAREDO, AIR—Sources in the American Irish Republic judicial system indicate three more political prisoners incarcerated in Hudnall Prison died during the past two weeks as a result of a hunger strike in protest against President Kennedy's summary detentions....

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March 5, 1966

Bombs Rock Downtown Corpus; Three Dead

(UPI) CORPUS CHRISTI, AIR—Six simultaneously-timed bombs destroyed three banks, a government post office, and two businesses in downtown Corpus Christi Saturday morning.

The Orange Klan telephoned local police at 4:45 a.m. and warned about the bombs, which all detonated at 5:00 a.m. The victims were a news vendor, a delivery driver, and a police officer who did not leave the area in time.

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July 23, 1968

Five Years On: City Quiet on Anniversary of Infamous Beating Death—But at a Price

By NORMA SAUCEDO

Corpus Christi Caller-Times

Mayor Anne Armstrong says it was the worst night of her life.

When she learned late in the day on July 23, 1963, that thirty-three-year old James A. Baker III, an attorney from Austin, Texas, had been beaten to death in a Catholic pub for wearing an orange shirt, "I felt like a fire bell had just sounded.

"We went on high alert immediately," she says. "We knew what was coming."

Armstrong and the leaders of Corpus Christi, as well as many other cities in the American Irish Republic, braced themselves for the series of riots that began as Orange sympathizers protested what they saw as Catholic brutality.

The event heralded a massive escalation of 'The Troubles' that have plagued the Republic ever since.

Corpus Christi hasn't seen a firebombing, kidnapping, or car bomb in over six months, said Armstrong, but peace has its price. "I don't think anyone is happy that we have martial law, and President Kennedy's ongoing use of emergency powers and summary detentions is, in my opinion, eroding in some fundamental way the spirit of the democratic process in our nation...."

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September 8, 1971

Kennedy Bucks Buckley for Third Term

By JOSEPH LEDWELL

The New York Times

LAREDO, AIR—John F. Kennedy became only the third president of the American Irish Republic—after Richard Dowling and Edward DeValera—to win a third term in office after he bested William F. Buckley, Jr., by a solid eight percentage points, fifty-one percent to forty-three percent. John Paisley of the United Democratic Party (UDP) came in a distant third with six percent.

This marked the first time in over fifty years that the United Republic Party (URP) failed to field a presidential candidate. After its 1965 nominee, former Londonderry Mayor Lloyd Bentsen, Jr., said he wasn't interested in another run, the former middle-of-the-road party fell apart.

Buckley's Traditional Irish Party (TIP) seemed close to gaining a majority in the AIR legislature, which may force President Kennedy further to the right politically.

Paisley, who sought refuge in Texas in 1965 after President Kennedy implemented summary detentions and only returned three years later after an AIR Supreme Court ruling that his arrest would be political retaliation, turned back calls during the campaign for Orange Klan sympathizers to formally renounce violence. "We will not leave ourselves defenseless in the face of Kennedy oppression," said Paisley....

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August 9, 1974

Buckley Escapes Assassination Attempt

By R.W. APPLE

The New York Times

SAN DIEGO, AIR—Suspected OK gunmen strafed the exterior of the Holy Family Catholic Church here as County Judge and Catholic political leader William F. Buckley, Jr., left the funeral of a slain AIRA member.

Buckley was not hurt and his bodyguards returned fire on his attackers, who escaped in three turbocharged Ford Mustangs with sunroofs. Three bystanders were injured, one critically.

Buckley was attending the funeral of Eddie 'Bad Boy' Morris, a sometime bouncer who was killed last week while attempting to rob a Londonderry bank. Speaking a few hours later at TIP headquarters across the square from the county courthouse, Buckley denounced "the brazen daylight attack which imperils innocent bystanders. Even stronger measures must be taken...."

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September 3, 1975

Nation Unites in Mourning for DeValera

By DIANE FUENTES

The Laredo News

MISSION, AIR—Leaders from the nations of the world gathered together in this Rio Grande border city to pay their last respects to Edward DeValera, 91, who died Aug. 29, 1975, quietly in his sleep at his home in the city.

Flags in the American Irish Republic flew at half-mast. Presidents Richard Nixon in the United States and Luis Echeverria in Mexico also ordered flags in their nations to be lowered in respect for the widely-revered leader.

In Laredo, President John F. Kennedy said, before leaving for the Rio Grande valley, "Everything the American Irish Republic is today, is owed to Edward DeValera."

After lying in state at the AIR capitol this past weekend, DeValera will be buried today at Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Cemetery in the city where he had lived since his retirement.

In an unprecedented show of unity, representatives of all major political parties, including Traditional Irish Party (TIP) leader William F. Buckley, Jr., as well as United Democratic Party (UDP) Chairman John Paisley, have said they will attend the graveside services, out of respect for the great leader.

Presidential spokesman Pierre Salinger said, "Anyone is welcome to attend so long as they are unarmed. Both Buckley and Paisley have agreed to that for themselves and their supporters.

"We can only hope that this marks the start of some sort of coming together of our people," said Salinger, "as we honor the legacy of Edward DeValera."

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September 17, 1975

The Economist

AIR in Ruins after Two Weeks of Rioting

By LEANDER PRICE

LONDONDERRY, AIR—"It's gone, all of it."

Max Rosenbloom tended bar for over forty years at O'Flaherty's Cantina in downtown Londonderry. In the haze created by dozens of fires still raging in the city following two weeks of violent rioting, the swirling ashes of the cantina blowing in the street seem the same colour as his silver hair. "My God,

dear God, my boys," he says, a tear running down his cheek. "How could this happen?"

A dozen cities in the buffer republic are mostly in ruins following the calamity created by the murder of Protestant congressman and Orange leader John Paisley, gunned down by a rogue member of President Kennedy's security forces as he left the graveside service for Edward DeValera in Mission Sept. 3.

A total mobilisation by all law enforcement agencies and the National Guard has failed to stem the violence, despite a dawn-to-dusk curfew. Sources in Laredo indicate President Kennedy may be forced to issue a shoot-to-kill order.

Rosenbloom, who is Jewish, shakes his head sadly as he looks up and down the burnt-out block where O'Flaherty's stood. "It's like two brothers committing mutual suicide," he says....

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July 5, 1976

Mercenaries Mop Up Last Pocket of OK Resistance

By NORMA SAUCEDO

The Corpus Christi Caller-Times

PORT ARANSAS, TX—A mercenary unit made up mostly of Israeli Defense Force (IDF) members on loan to the Kennedy administration completed the pacification of the last pockets of active Orange Klan resistance in Londonderry Sunday.

The commandos landed here on the Texas coast Friday morning—with the tacit cooperation of the American government—and quickly moved across the border and into the American Irish Republic.

President Kennedy asked for the special forces because of the badly-depleted status of the AIR defense and police forces following the ten-month struggle to put down 'The Troubles'.

Over six thousand people have died in bombings and riots since the Sept 3, 1975, murder of Londonderry congressman John Paisley following the funeral of President Edward DeValera in Mission.

The timing of the final assault on the Orange stronghold coincided with the U.S. Bicentennial celebration so as to attract the least attention from the American populace. Observers said the fresh and well-supplied mercenaries made short work of the exhausted OK partisans and suffered no casualties during the fighting.

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Ironically, expedition leader Commander Jonathan Netanyahu was the only fatality, killed by a sniper while sitting in a jeep on a downtown street in front of the ruins of a former Orange hangout and pub. The sniper, identified as Sheila McWilliams, had been a server at O'Flaherty's Cantina, and had lived in the ruins of the establishment since it was torched last fall. The Israeli mercenaries shot her and left the body in the street....

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September 7, 1977

Buckley Wins Unopposed

By DAVE BOND

Christian Science Monitor

LAREDO, AIR—William F. Buckley, Jr., cruised to his assured victory as the head of the TIP-Fine Gael coalition in Tuesday's election, becoming the thirteenth president of the American Irish Republic.

No other candidates were able to qualify for the ballot under the decrees promulgated under the national emergency authority of President John F. Kennedy. Most observers assumed President Kennedy planned to use those decrees to remain in office indefinitely, but the three-term president surprised everyone in April by announcing he was stepping down.

"I think he bowed to the inevitable," said Lloyd Bentsen, Jr., the former mayor of Londonderry who now lives in Houston, Texas. "Buckley is shoving him aside. He gets to play Hindenburg to Buckley's Hitler."

The prospect of further crackdowns upon the Protestant minority in the American Irish Republic under a Buckley administration has appalled the international community. In Washington, D.C., President Jimmy Carter said the U.S. is ready to back sanctions in the United Nations against the AIR.

"The American Irish Republic has become a little slice of dictatorship between two great democracies," said White House spokesman Jody Powell. "This is appalling."

Texas Governor Dolph Briscoe said his state's border has been opened to any and all refugees. "Although we may allow in some people that don't need to be here at all, we can't ignore the many people in genuine fear of their lives." Mexican President Jose Lopez Portillo also opened his country's borders.

In a brief statement following the confirmation of the results by the Electoral Commission at the national capitol, President-elect Buckley said, "There will be continuity and stability between the two administrations, and we will have increasingly-effective law and order."

Asked to elaborate upon his statement by the foreign press corps, Buckley snapped, "This is a free country, but the majority rules. Dissidents are free to go."

When a reporter asked, "Where?" Buckley snapped again, "They can go to Texas. Or Hell. There's plenty of OK thugs there, too. Either suits me."

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December 6, 1977

No Word from Feds on Cause of Massive Response in Texas Panhandle

(UPI) AMARILLO, TX—Fifteen miles of U.S. Highway 60 in the Texas Panhandle remained closed Wednesday morning following an undetermined incident that drew a response from regular U.S. Army troops and the National Guard as well as the FBI and U.S. Marshals.

The massive mobilization appeared to be a manhunt or search of some kind, but authorities were closemouthed about the cause.

Moore County Sheriff Dodson Powell said his deputies withdrew as the Federal forces moved in. "I really don't know what the cause of all this is," he said.

The area cordoned off encompasses approximately forty square miles and includes a number of oil and gas wells, fertilizer plants, and the Pantex nuclear weapons assembly and disassembly plant.

Sheriff Powell refused to speculate whether there had been any kind of hazardous materials spill or accident. "I really can't say, all I've heard is rumors."

Sheriff's deputies at the county courthouse in Dumas said there had been an emergency call at 2:35 p.m. Tuesday regarding a disabled eighteen-wheeler on Farm to Market Road 683 adjacent to the Pantex plant, but security from the plant reached the location first and turned the deputies back....

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January 1, 1978

World Appalled as American Irish Republic Capital of Laredo Goes Up in Nuclear Fireball

By JOSEPH LEDWELL

The New York Times

SAN ANTONIO, TX—American troops are being deployed to South Texas, and adjacent areas of the former American Irish Republic, as the nation collapses in the wake of a terrorist nuclear attack that wiped out Laredo.

Television viewers watched as President-elect William F. Buckley, Jr., stood at the podium, then, when he raised his hand to take the oath of office, the screen turned white and transmission ceased....

The Naming Braid

Lindsey Duncan

We are nameless and voiceless: placeholders, wives and mothers, sisters and handmaidens. Beautiful and courteous, worthy and virtuous, we are the answers to questing hearts—but ourselves, we ask no questions.

In Brethland, a name is history, acknowledgement that the bearer will be remembered. Most men are named at manhood, most women never, even when they inspire great deeds.

When the throne was left to me after my brothers were lost to the beckoning ocean—Surety and Valor, granted their names at birth—I was named Foresight. I was called so because the advisors saw in me wisdom they thought inscrutable. It was safer described as witching whispers than attributed to natural intelligence.

I have brought all of you to my keep, high above the salt spray where seal women once rested in their coves, to name those whose stories move me. History is the greatest gift I know.

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There were two knights in the north country who were dear friends, and whose wives became pregnant within weeks of each other. The first woman bore two sons, later to be named Archer and Ardent. The other strode into the close mahogany hall where the new mother greeted her well-wishers.

Her icy fingers chucked the infants under the chin. She smiled, false and shallow. "Why should you celebrate? No woman births two children at once unless they have different fathers."

Silence in the torchlight. The new mother turned fallow as her rival whirled and departed.

Even before the night's air engulfed her, she wished the hasty words unsaid. Yet it would be past bearing to apologize, and so she forgot until she gave birth to two daughters beyond compare.

Rather than bear her own condemnation, she summoned her maid. She gazed over the cradles, then threw out her hand and imagined that the child she did not point to was thin and sickly. Thus consoled, she said, "Bring me my babe, and take the other

far from me. Put my ring around her neck—"With this, she hoped to salve her conscience.

You know how you were found, wrapped in swaddling clothes in the arms of an ancient tree. In memory of that, I name you Ash. An old fisherman and his wife raised you. She taught you the arts of herbalism and magic potions.

You, her sister, so fair, so pure. You were content as a dutiful daughter. Your parents also compared you to a tree. I call you Willow in memory of the bond of sisters.

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An eastern lord slew a white stag while hunting. The beast cursed him: one of his children would have all virtues but beauty, the other all beauties but virtue. So they were born two years apart, the firstborn round and gawky, the other slight and delicate.

With miles of hunting ground for her dowry, the younger was married to a warrior-knight named Wolf. You, the elder, were held by an unusual stricture: no man could marry you unless he could carry you up the nearest mountain without pause for rest. It was your mother's last request, to ensure that whoever tried to claim you truly wanted your hand. An impossible thing, it seemed to you, but you protected yourself with dreams of love. I name you Reverie in their memory.

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This happened in the first year of my reign: the nobleman Wolf disappeared and was declared dead. A boastful Archer courted and won his widow. A summer couple they made, russet hair and golden hands.

Willow was my handmaiden then. When the lords went hunting, we often slipped from the party and took our respite by the side of what had once been a unicorn pool. Malachite moss carpeted our sanctuary, and we splashed and murmured secrets.

"He has a twin brother," I said, "supposed to be even more gentle and fair than he."

"More gentle?" Willow smiled. "A compliment indeed."

"I hope we are entering an era where that virtue is worth more than any show of arms," I said.

She rested a hand on my arm. "You are the one who can take us into that era."

"I wonder—" I stopped at a rustling in the bushes and drew myself up, reaching for my dagger. "Something approaches."

A massive silver wolf, fur matted with blood, and eyes wild with terror, barreled into view. Willow shrielled. I tried to make my hands move with the blade I was ill-trained to use.

The beast staggered towards me and collapsed with its head on my knee. I might have struck, even through my astonishment, but it whimpered, and the look in its eyes was too mournful for me to cause it more pain.

I stroked its fur, tentatively, and moved its head so I could study its wounds. "It's badly hurt."

Willow hovered, fidgeting with her skirt. "What should I do? Should we hit it with a rock?"

"No." I spoke with the authority of a queen. "Find the healer. Bring him here."

Willow looked askance, but flitted away. I received a similar look from the healer, one that said without words that as soon as the beast was well, it would turn on me—but a sovereign of Brethland has certain privileges.

We carried the wolf on a litter and I installed it, or rather him, on my bed. He circled, making a mess of the blanket and mounding pillows to his liking. Dark amber eyes watched me—impudently, I thought—to see whether I would protest.

I made to ruffle the fur behind his head, and was surprised when he let me. "You don't own the keep, you know."

He stared back with knowledge in his eyes, then curled up and napped.

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While the wolf was recovering, Ardent came to visit his brother. I saw that the slight young man with lover's lips was as mild as rumor told. They went as a pair, the warrior and the scholar, welcome in every company.

Reverie, with your shining qualities hidden beneath a plain shape: you and your father also arrived, for it was high summer and few could politely avoid Brethland's royal keep. You kept to your chambers, hiding your face and form from a callous world, but you were expected to meet your brother by marriage and his family.

They dined by twilight in the tower. Reverie's voice rose like the tides in ebbs of contemplation, flows of merriment. Ardent leaned in, face flush, words conspiratorial.

"I would like to see you again," he said finally. "Is that possible?"

"Tomorrow night," her father interrupted. "After the evening's festivities."

It was his thought to keep her out of day's revealing light, and Reverie flushed. Ardent saw the look and knew not the source; his smile turned his eyes silver. Despite herself, she returned it.

Her sister squeezed Archer's hand. "Your brother doesn't need to be so charitable for the sake of family, my dear," she said.

He brushed her cheek with light fingers. "My brother has his own mind."

Reverie, pretending not to hear, rose and went to the window, where the cold sea tossed forever.

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Let me guide us from this drama to the story of abandoned Ash, who remained content with the common folk who had raised her. She had become famous for the herbaries she practiced. She still wore the ring around her neck, unaware of its origins.

It happened that the young lord of this region, a honey-haired horseman named Fortune, took ill and could not be cured by the court doctors. He summoned Ash to his side.

Her hands trembled when she entered the chamber, a place hot with anxiety and thick with the muck of every failed poultice. He lay on the bed, decently clothed of course, but slick as a seal from sweat. He watched her through hazy eyes, and in delirium, murmured, "If you have come to take me to heaven, lady...."

Ash remembered herself and curtsied before she approached. "I am here to do my best to keep you from heaven," she said. She took his hand to test his strength.

His eyes widened when they touched, fingers tensing around hers. For an instant, he showed no signs of sickness, but held on as if he might never let go. Her breath came quick; the warmth in her hand overcame her.

"Maybe I am already in heaven," he murmured before he closed his eyes.

Ash could find nothing to say. She ducked her head to work. She tried to remain silent when she visited him, but it made things no easier: he looked on her with wonder and astonishment, and she could not help but look back. In the light touch of their hands was a promise; in silent breaths, things were said that could not be unspoken.

One day, when Fortune was almost well, she rose to leave and he laid a hand on her shoulder. In place of all the beauties of courtship, there was only one word. "Please." Even had she been named, he would not have needed to speak her name then.

She nodded and gave herself to him.

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Once the wolf was well enough to lope around, he attached himself to my royal person whenever I went to my study or along the paths by the sea. He ambled close, batting me with his tail. He brought me branches, always with a gold or blue flower on the tip. Sometimes he followed me into the banquet hall, but he preferred to drowse on my bed while the humans feasted.

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Archer took his wife on a tour of the western shores, but Ardent remained. Twice he and Reverie met after dark, always chaperoned. They chattered away on matters of the court and matters of the universe, wondering why rats had tails and how the sunset acquired its color. Like two children, they explored the world through words. Reverie felt safe with him, though her secret burned.

One day, she let herself into the private gardens, locking the gate behind her. She settled on a bench to work her embroidery, reams of silver cloth spilling around her. Her needle skipped with her heart. She could not have been more content.

Leaves rustling caught her attention. She jumped to her feet to see the unmistakable auburn of Ardent's hair as he pulled himself over the wall. In shock, she hunted for some place to hide, but she could not make her feet move.

It was no easy climb for the young man, but he reached the top and looked straight at her. The expression on his face, however, was not horror or even surprise, but the same shy smile. "My lady," he said, "by my hand and troth, be my wife."

Reverie, not composed enough to remember the onus placed upon any who might marry her, fainted right there.

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That evening, Willow paused in her handmaiden duties to draw me aside. "I have news," she said.

I studied her wan face in the torchlight. "What is it?"

"My father has set me to marry a southern lord." At this, her timorous smile vanished. "He already has a lover. I've been assured that he understands he needs to marry in the blood...."

"Surely he's giving her up? I can't imagine anyone dishonoring you so," I said.

Willow nodded. "But what if—might they have been happy?"

"Our first responsibility is to duty." I had said those words before, until it seemed my lips would bleed. "You do the right thing."

"It is said," she said, "that we can be happy with anyone, if we choose not to love." Her fingers twined in her skirts. "Can I believe that, Foresight?"

I touched her shoulder, and drew her into an embrace. "You are strong enough to make it. I will miss you." We packed her things together, though it was a task not suited to a queen.

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Meanwhile, Reverie worked hard to change her appearance: she fasted, she went for long walks around the castle and into the shadowed woods, and she approached me to ask if she could ride with the hunt. She stood in my study with cheeks flushed and body tense.

"We would be glad to have you," I said. I reached down to stroke the wolf, which had curled up under my desk, and was startled to hear him growl. I frowned. "What is wrong with you?"

Reverie backed up. "I should go."

"He's never like this...." I trailed off, patting his shoulder in a way I hoped was soothing. Narrowed eyes slunk to my visitor, but he lowered his head. His tail lay flat and unhappy. "I look forward to your presence on the next hunt," I said.

"Thank you, my queen."

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Each of you knows that Ash—for it was Fortune who was forced to take a noble wife over his lover—bowed to the inevitable. Not all of you know that she asked permission to remain in the manor until after the wedding. She took on the task of preparing the bridal chamber, unaware of whom she awaited.

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Fortune caught her the day before his future bride's arrival and drew her tight. "You know I would stay with you until the end of time, if I could."

She tilted her face into his and tried to hold onto the silence that bound them. "I know," she whispered.

Willow arrived with four carriages trimmed in gold, her veils the color of smoke. She kept her head down as she descended and let the steward lead her to her chamber.

Ardent leapt down from the last carriage and set off on his own mission. Asking around the manor, he found a servant willing to point him to the famous potion-maker said to live in that region. Ash's adoptive mother greeted him warmly and offered him a brew that would restore strength and vitality to him, no matter how weary he was. "If you need more," she said, "you must turn to my child."

"Good woman," he answered, "you have already given me more than I could have asked for. Your aid will bring me to my beloved's arms."

"Doesn't always happen that way," the old woman muttered. She stumped away.

The next day, one of the maidservants accidentally tore the linens for the master bedchamber, and Ash lingered to repair them. She sank into deep sadness as her fingers ran along the sheets, and thought she would leave Fortune one last token of herself. She removed her ring and methodically began to sew it onto the righthand pillow.

Willow hovered in the guest chamber, unable to relax. Finally, she resolved that if she saw the room that would soon become hers, she might be able to imagine herself there and come to terms with her role. Honor and duty, she reminded herself.

She padded barefoot down still halls and came to the double doors. She braced her hands on the venerable handles and pulled them open in a rush. Amber sunset flowed over her from the window.

Ash looked up and gasped, darting to her feet. The sheet dropped from her fingers, and the ring flared in the light. "I'm sorry, my lady...."

Willow blinked, her attention on the small trinket. She stepped forward, knelt by the bed, and took it between her fingers. She recognized the pattern, her mother's heraldry. Her head came back, and she stared as if at a mirror.

Ash flinched, half expecting to be struck, but could not look away. "You...could be my twin," she said.

"How can that be?" Willow asked—though convinced in her heart. "I see this ring, yet I have no sister."

"It was in my blankets when I was found as a babe," her opposite said slowly. "I never knew whence it had come. If you are my sister," she lit as if adorned by stars, "then I can marry my lord." She hesitated. "Unless your heart is set...."

"If you are my sister...." Willow felt relief sweep over her. "Then I have no need of him." The siblings embraced.

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At that very moment, Ardent, flush with hope, raced back to his cloistered beloved with the potion tucked close to his chest. They met at the foot of the tower where her family stayed. He stopped to stare, stunned.

His lady had ever been luminous of thought; lighter of frame, now, the animation of her eyes seemed to shine through more clearly. It would never matter that her hair was mud-hued and brambly, that she had too much nose. To him—even nameless—she was perfection.

Her father stepped down the stairs and thrust his body between them. "Don't presume too much," he said, "until you have bested the mountain. It was my final promise to her mother, and I will not bend."

Reverie sighed, but was heartened by the wonder in her love's eyes. "Tomorrow," she said.

The next day, Ardent and Reverie made their way to the nadir of the mountain. Under her father's suspicious eye, he prepared to lift her into his arms.

"I have men along every part of the trail," her guardian said. "If you step falsely, if you even slow, they will know you have forfeited."

"Love will keep me steady, my lord," Ardent said, and lifted the maiden.

Reverie clung to him, winding her arms about his neck so that his hold might be as easy as possible. They started up, carried at first by hope and confidence. No fond words were exchanged; he needed his every breath on the steep ascent.

A month before, the journey would have been impossible. Even now, one hour was taxing, the second an ordeal. Ardent shuddered as the path ran endless before him.

"Do you need your potion?" Reverie asked, for he had told her of it by way of a note.

He shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "Not yet."

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Even then, as I mark time, the twins Ash and Willow stood hand in hand before a bemused Fortune, sharing what they knew of the story.

"So we believe that we are sisters," Willow finished, "and that means...."

The two lovers linked eyes and shared a smile that said everything, but then Fortune frowned. "How can you be sure?"

One of Willow's maids entered and cried out, spilling the tea tray on the snowsilk rug. She dropped to her knees and stammered pleas for forgiveness.

"Now, hold," Fortune said. "What gives you such cause for dismay?"

The maid looked up, tears in her eyes. "For years I served this family faithfully," she said, "and kept their terrible secret. But seeing these two side by side.... This must be the child I carried away to save her mother's shame."

"Are you sure of this?" Willow pressed.

So the story was recounted, amid much astonishment at its particulars. "Such turmoil from a foul word," Fortune said. He turned to the woman who would have been his bride. "Would your queen bless our union?"

"She would do so with gladness," Willow answered—and she knew me well.

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What occurred next was told to me in confidence by Reverie. I ask that none of you repeat it.

When Ardent was three-quarters of the way up the mountain, he started to breathe short, his face pale and hands clammy.

"Drink the vial," Reverie begged him.

"Can't," he said. "Have to slow to drink it."

"Then slow."

"Your father's men might take it for stopping." He gulped in a breath. "I could not risk that."

"Even if you faltered, my sister and Archer would always make us welcome in their household." Reverie pleaded with her eyes.

"We cannot rely on their kindness." Those words brought him to the brink of exhaustion, but he pressed up the punishing incline. "That would not be enough for me...."

Her hands tightened. "Please take the vial."

He shook his head. "I dare not."

Reverie fell silent. She recognized arguing would only rob him of the breath he needed to climb. Just past the next sentry station, they lurched as Ardent lost his balance and fell. Reverie landed atop him and felt the sudden spasm of his heart.

"Ardent!" she cried. He did not answer, his eyes dark and faint. Hastily, she drew the vial from his vest. "We may be parted," she said, "but I will not see you die." She worked his lips apart and poured the liquid down his throat.

He sputtered and gasped. The subtle magics began their work, and he sat up in a rush. Before the strength had returned to his veins, he made to rise...but then paused as he realized their predicament.

Reverie wobbled to her feet, one hand on his shoulder as they faced the nearest sentry. The man watched them, arms folded over a branch.

Ardent put an arm under hers. "We will finish the journey, even if it means nothing," he murmured, even as he smiled bravely.

"You would have worked yourself to death rather than drop her," the sentry said. "Carry on. No one will hear the story from me."

Reverie squealed, and Ardent laughed into her hair as he swung her into newly-revitalized arms. "We will never forget this," he promised. "Thank you."

With new strength, he forged up the mountain. The last inclines fell away without effort. Finally he stumbled again...but they had arrived, and all of Brethland lay at their feet.

"We've done it, my love," he whispered. "We've done it."

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For all the toil and hardship of ruling a country, there are some positive aspects. I had the pleasure of presiding over the weddings. With radiant faces and hands that never parted, the couples took their first steps into a lifetime of devotion...and then the feast.

Every knight and lady in Brethland was in attendance, the brides and grooms the most glorious quartet there. Reverie and Ash fell to talking as their husbands traded boasts...or rather, Reverie talked and Ash listened with eloquent eyes.

Willow sat at my right, waving to illustrate her story. We shared free laughter, the wolf curled comfortably at my feet.

Each lord and his lady came up to pay their respects. The happy couples were first, Reverie and Ardent buoyant and

chattering, Ash and Fortune solemn and beaming. Their parents were next, then the brothers....

The lupine form under the table launched himself, snarling, at Archer and his lady. He snapped, he snarled, and there was a crunch as he bit off the woman's nose. My knights launched to their feet, swords rattling.

"Enough!" I shouted. The wolf dropped back on its haunches, whining.

"Let me finish it," Archer said, pushing in front of his wife with youthful bravado.

"No," I said, "he's never acted like this. There must be a reason." I turned a curious eye on the woman, who looked paler than pain should have made her as the court healer stanching the bleeding. "Whatever restitution you ask will be paid," I assured her. "Do you know this creature?"

She shook her head, too hastily, her breaths ragged. "Never seen it before in my—" The wolf barked, loud and furious. "Oh, off with you!"

"You really ought to kill it," Archer said. I looked at him, hard, but could see no trace of furtiveness, only concern for his wife.

"There is something amiss here," I said. "I am not sure...."

Willow's fingers tightened on my arm. "Foresight!"

The wolf batted a bowl of sweet-sauce off the table. Strokes of his paw formed the damp shape of letters. Whispers traveled, and soon every lord and lady stared in anticipation of the conclusion.

"Betrayal" was the word.

Archer's wife swooned, and would have fainted but for his strong hands.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"I think that question is for her," I said. "Lady, what is the meaning?"

She shivered and tried to shrink away. "My husband was a monster," she spat. "Wolf—was a wolf! He told me that he changed one evening each week, but as long as he had his own clothes to come back to, his form would return—as if that was supposed to be a comfort! If this is the beast that stands before you now, lady, he has only what he deserves."

Voices buzzed in gossip and intrigue. I barely remember speaking. "Where did you hide them?"

"I never said—"

"Now," I cut her off.

Archer rubbed her shoulders, his expression shaken. "Tell them where, love."

Whimpering, she did. I sent pages to fetch his garments and watched the trembling couple. I was sure now: he had known nothing of his wife's perfidy.

The pages returned with a set of blue riding clothes. They laid them on the ground before the wolf, which circled once, sniffed disdainfully, and lay back down.

"It's just a wild dog," someone said scornfully.

"No, wait!" Willow said. "If he is a man, then he can scarcely wish to change in front of the entire court. We should take him to a chamber and give him privacy."

At these words, my companion stood and headed for the keep. I held up a hand to forestall onlookers, took the clothes, and hurried after.

He led me to my door. I thought of scolding him, but if he did turn out to be nothing more than an animal, I would feel foolish indeed. Instead, I laid the clothes on the bed and retreated.

Though I strained for sound, there was nothing. I had just decided I must open the door and admit defeat when it swung wide.

A rugged man with tousled maple curls stood there in the outfit I had left. Familiar amber eyes watched me—and even more familiar was the grin in them.

"Thank you for your many courtesies, my queen," he said formally, bending one knee.

I thought of the times he had curled up beside me, the unguarded moments as I worked, and could not help but blush. "I cannot believe what your wife has done to you."

Wolf shrugged. "I am a monster, in a manner of speaking. Perhaps it was too much to expect her to smile and accept that. Could you?"

"I could," I answered, then realized it was rhetorical. "Say the word, and you both may go home."

"No," he said, "let her keep that man of hers. I don't blame him, he's too soft in the head to have seen what was going on."

I cleared my throat. "It is not politic to say—"

"You live in the wild long enough, you realize that life is too ugly and short to spend time being gentle about it." He leaned against the door. "Let them go."

"I will handle the aspects in law," I said. "What will you do?" I found, suddenly and surely, that I would miss his presence at my side.

Wolf arched a brow, studying me with an expression no less inscrutable than when he had been trapped in animal form. "Were you serious when you said you could smile and accept what I am?"

I looked at him sharply. "I was," I said, "but not—"

"Give me no denials, Foresight." In private, it was not improper to use my name. "And give me no promises. Give me leave to court you—that is all I ask."

"Done, and gladly," I said. I could not restrain my smile. "You are always welcome in my keep."

He took my hand, bent, lightly kissed the back. "I will make up to you my many impertinences," he said with a small chuckle. "What will you do now?"

"We," I said, offering him my arm, "will return to the feast. I will invite my handmaid and the new brides to remain afterwards."

"For?"

"You have your voice. Time and past they had theirs."

He cocked his head as he took my arm. "A chain of names to tie up the tale?"

"A braid," I said. "Love allows no chains."

You are Ash, Willow, and Reverie now, no longer nameless. As your lives are braided together, so I bind you to Brethland and its history. May these not be the last stories to bear your names.



Erqi

Elizabeth Kate Switaj

In the Garden of Rust and Salt

Ferrett Steinmetz

Every day, before Evelyn became Queen of the Junkyard, Hir Becken made her put on the heavy leather explorer's outfit. It consisted of a set of scratched goggles, a thick apron that had nearly buckled her knees the first time she'd tried it on, and over-sized Kevlar gloves that were so big she had to tie them around her wrists with rubber bands.

Hir Becken said she was the best employee it had ever had. And at nine, Evelyn had never had a job that made her happier.

"Please, Pops," she asked, late at night when they were roasting weenies over an oil drum fire. "Can we stay here?"

"We'll see," he said, scratching his salt-and-peppered beard. That meant no. She knew that by now.

Evelyn had two duties: the first was fetching the smaller items out of the mazes of rusted metal. She'd follow the faint 'bleep' of her RFID-chip detector down long corridors of teetering machinery and broken glass, until she finally uncovered a siphoning reblower half-buried underneath a pile of old storage drums.

Hir Becken personally tagged every item that came into the salvage yard, but the trick was finding them again in the tumbles of old fuselages. But Hir Becken—who, confusingly, was neither a 'he' nor a 'she'—was surprised by Evelyn's dogged ability to track down any item programmed into her chipdec.

"The you works with the goodness," it said, leaning out from its water tank to stroke the back of her neck affectionately with a moist, suckered hand. The clamminess made her shudder, but she tried to hide it because she liked the kind way Hir Becken spoke.

Evelyn's second duty was to clear debris off the larger items so that Hir Becken could get at them with the crane. Evelyn tried not to bother Pops, who had a bum leg, but ever since she'd sprained her arm trying to move a weapons locker, Hir Becken would yell at Pops through the speaker.

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"The out you should be the getting!" Hir Becken would say, and Evelyn bristled at the way Hir Becken yelled at Pops. "The hiring was the you, not the daughter! Clear the wing—the customers, they have the money now!"

Pops gave a respectful tap on Hir Becken's water tank, but as soon as it couldn't see him, he made a face at Evelyn. Evelyn giggled.

Then he'd limp slowly out of the cool shadows of the brick factory and down the gear-strewn pathway, wiping the sweat off his forehead with a dirty handkerchief. And he'd shove junk off the vast sweep of ship's wing, strong as ever, though he'd collapse afterwards.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," he said, massaging his thigh. "I wish I could do more, but...." And he looked down sadly at his leg, which a mean policeman had crushed years before she was born.

"It's okay," she said, kissing him. "You take care of me, I take care of you. That's the deal, right?"

"Right," he said, ruffling her hair. And that touch, she *did* like.

Then Hir Becken would sound the sirens, and slither up the bubbling watershaft to the top where the controls of its great crane were. And Evelyn would do a little dance as the claw descended, a huge spiked thing so big it looked like it could grab God Himself by the scruff of the neck, and she'd cover her ears as it slammed into gleaming titanium.

She'd clap with joy as it effortlessly hauled a seventy-ton fuselage up and away, then dropped it in the cargo hold of an even bigger ship a mile away.

She felt small when the crane moved airships—but *wonderfully* small, like an insect watching titans dance. She felt privileged to see such powerful machinery at work. But that wasn't the best part.

No, the best part was the exploring.

The junkyard was the first place she could just wander away in and never have to worry. Oh, she sweated so much in the beaten-leather apron that she brought canisters of water so she wouldn't pass out on the heated metal. But there were no mean kids with rocks, or dangerous police officers with tasers, or creepy grownups who wanted to touch her.

She and Pops had been travelling as long as she could remember—but wherever they were, Pops wasn't home much. He was always out trying to get them money at The Tables. So all she

ever did was watch the cockroaches crawl until Pops came home, or wash his clothes as he slept off his drunks, or put dishes in steaming washers at restaurants until her hands were so red and wrinkled she could barely take the money at the end of the night.

The junkyard, though, was a fine place to be a queen: deep and full of mystery.

Sometimes, she'd ignore the bleeps of her chipdec and just wander. She knew it was wrong, being so neglectful of her duties to Hir Becken, but there were so many things here.

She discovered the inside of an old luxury liner, complete with cushioned seats and fold-up trays, and played stewardess with the food carts.

She discovered a bank of pachinko machines under a heap of broken neon signs, and spent hours watching the tiny balls tumble in a clattering rain down the funnels.

She investigated strange fungal gardens of lavender and ochre, blossoming in moist caverns underneath the three sheltering wings of a spaceship.

Every time, she found something new: the top of a tank, its reflective armor still gleaming dangerously; an old Ferris wheel tipped on its side in a tangle of struts; ancient port-a-potties, their insides now terrariums of green ivy and buzzing insects.

"Please, Pops," she begged again after the hardest, bestest day of her life. "Can't we stay?"

Pops sipped from his flask and looked at her gravely. "Now, sweetie," he said. "You know that's not up to me."

She snorted. "Hir Becken is nice. We play hide and seek." "Come here."

She crawled onto his lap, relishing the comforting scents of old cedar and tobacco. He sat her up straight.

"Evelyn," he said slowly. "Do you remember what happened on Caroon?"

She tensed.

"What happened?"

"Fat...Fat Mike tried to shoot you." She remembered how big the gun was—and how alarmed she'd been that Fat Mike wanted to kill Pops, because up until then Fat Mike had been the most jovial, friendliest man alive. But Fat Mike's broad face had contorted with anger, and the only reason he hadn't shot is that Pops had held

Evelyn up by her shoulders and screamed, "My daughter! Please! *My daughter!*"

"That's right," Pops said sadly, taking a long pull on his whiskey. "We're rats, Evs. Nobody likes us for long. There's not enough action here for my tastes. If it was just us, I'd stay here forever. But...that's not the way it works for us."

She swallowed back the sadness. He was right, of course; Fat Mike was just one of any number of people who'd seemed perfectly nice, then turned on them without warning. They'd nearly been killed on half a dozen planets.

"I hate the steamships," she sulked, leaning back into his belly. They weren't even powered by steam—they were just cheap, and smelled like armpits, and were filled with ugly men who wanted to feel her up. Sometimes they even offered her money—but Pops always shooed them away, saying, "She's a virgin. She's worth more to me than *that*."

Evelyn didn't know what a virgin was, but it must have been something very special indeed from the way Pops said it.

Pops pulled her against his worn jacket.

"I hate it, too," he said. "But it's the best I can do for now. Some day, we'll catch a break—and then we'll travel on sleek dynoships. We'll eat steak, and have nice stewardesses give us massages, and when we get off the ship we'll go straight to a home with a dining room and a TV."

"That sounds nice."

"Dream of that, honey," he said. "Dream of that while you sleep."

She closed her eyes. They both pretended to each other at night; she pretended to go to sleep, and Pops pretended he was going to stay. But, of course, as soon as she faked snoring, he slipped away. She could hear him limping to the door, headed out to meet his friends in the city, from where he always came home stinking of smoke.

She heard a bright splash of water as Hir Becken emerged from one of its water pools.

"The you should give the her a shot of the tetanus," it scolded in a prissy, hissing voice. "Why the you thinks I dress the her in the leather? Because the she likes the cows?"

"Keep it down," he whispered. "I'm trying to get out."

"No? That is what the you always does. Get out when the nobody looks. The she is learning the your bad habits, you know." Evelyn curled tight into a ball. "The she slips off into the junkyard in the work and pretends not to hear the me. The junkyard! Where the she is surrounded by the jagged rust. The *tetanus*."

"We're strong stock. We don't need shots."

"The your support is as generous as a Hir brooder."

Pops' voice rose in mocking anger. "You know the deal: the her, the me. Don't think you can the separate the us."

Evelyn kept still as her father's boot steps faded away into nothingness. But then she heard a playful gurgle and bloop of water and smiled; her father was gone.

Evelyn pressed her ear to the stony floor, her whole body quivering with excitement. If she concentrated really hard, she could just make out the slooshing sound as Hir Becken darted through its underground caverns.

"Marco!" she yelled.

There was a torrent of bubbles deep and far away that sounded like "Polo."

She leapt to her feet, chasing the noise, running through the rooms and listening, listening, *listening* to see where Hir Becken would emerge next. The brick complex had a hundred water-holes—some under thick iron covers like manholes, others in bubbling pools at the back of closets, all leading back to the hidden maze of water underneath.

She quivered with happiness. There were mysteries in the junkyard, and mysteries under the ground in Hir Becken's secret cavern-home, where her aquatic friend raced her to its next breath.

By being very quiet she picked up the faintest lap of waves underneath the green ottoman in the lounge. Using all her strength, she pushed it aside—and there was a tiny pool of purest blue. Hir Becken poked out its head, a smiling otter.

"The found me you have!"

"You have an escape route in the *lounge*?"

"I have the one everywhere," it demurred, pulling its squamous body out of the hole. Hir Becken had told her it was like a frog—it *could* breathe air. It just preferred not to, which was why it hired humans. "This is why I live the here, near the sea, by the cove. Every day, I scrape another room."

"I wish I could go underneath," she said.

"The you would drown," it assured her, touching her with its chill sucker-fingers. "It is lightless down there. The me would not see the you harmed. I chose the you."

She wasn't sure she liked the sound of that.

"It is not like the that," Hir Becken explained, its whiskers drooping. "You mammals treat the birthing and the raising as the same thing. But the Hir birth huge schools of tiny tads, dropped into the sea. The brooder cannot protect the thousands."

"Pops protects me."

Hir Becken rolled its soft body on the floor. "He did not choose the you."

She hated it when Hir Becken said these things. "He's kept me safe...."

"No. I choose the you. I give the leather so you do not have the hurt. I pay the wages of two when I only want the one. I will probably pay for the tetanus, too." It sighed in a spray of sea. "The Pops wastes the money on the cards."

"That's not his fault," she protested. "He gets *cheated*."

"You humans treat the family as an obligation," Hir Becken said, ignoring her. "The Hir know the truth of it: the family is a choice."

That made no sense to Evelyn; how could you choose *not* to have a Pops?

"I choose to take the you as family," it continued. "One day, when I am the dying, I will descend into the caverns and give you the money I have in the my sleep chamber."

"I was the lonely for so very long. I could give the money to the my thousand brothers in the sea. But what do the they have aside from the genetics? Why should the they get the my pool? Not a one of them have made the me laugh. The they do not play the polo."

She grinned.

"So the you will have it all when the me dies—the junkyard, the money. *That* is what the family is about. The choice."

Evelyn wasn't sure what to say to that. She was wary of promises; promises were things that got broken. So instead, she asked:

"Can we play some more?"

"The yesness." Hir Becken smiled, and darted eagerly into the water. And now when she chased it, she imagined that these were her hallways, her rooms, her tunnels running underneath the earth.

The place seemed too big for one person to own, though. The only thing she'd ever owned before was a doll, but a blotchy-faced girl had taken it. Something this huge couldn't be just given, could it?

"Well, *you're* quiet lately," Pops said later that week, and Evelyn blushed.

She'd always felt a little guilty talking to Hir Becken—it wasn't right, being friends with someone who disliked your Pops. That was why she'd played alone with Hir Becken. And now...

...she didn't want to tell Pops.

That confused her—she'd never kept a secret from him before. At first, she was afraid that Pops would laugh and tell her that Hir Becken was just funning her, that no little rat-girl ever got a whole junkyard to themselves, and when he said that part of her future would break and fall to pieces and she'd never be able to put it together again.

But that wasn't true. She trusted Hir Becken.

So why didn't she want to tell?

She wandered through the junkyard, grateful for the isolation, trying to think of a reason not to tell Pops. After all, she'd be Queen of the Junkyard, and wield all the power of the thunderous crane, and she'd let Pop stay out all night, every night.

It was strange, having a good thing that felt like a bad secret. Something tugged her mouth shut every time she opened it, and then she became afraid that she might blurt it out, so she said nothing.

She was suffocating under the silence.

"Before Hir Becken dies he's going to swim down to the caverns underneath and get his money and give me the whole junkyard," she said, speaking so quickly Pops had to slow her down and have her start again. "And then we'll live here forever, so we don't have to go. We can just wait. Wait forever."

To her relief, Pops didn't tell her she was being foolish. But he didn't seem interested in living in the junkyard, either. Instead, he asked her lots of questions about the underground caverns. She

was glad to tell him; she had mapped out most of the warrens, and it felt good answering his questions like a grownup.

"So his money is under *here*?" he asked, rubbing the sole of his boot against the grit of the concrete. "In a box?"

"I don't know what it's in," she said, scratching her arms. "But he said it was there."

Pops took her by both her shoulders, hugging her tight, filling her with pride. "You did good," he said. "Real good."

Two nights later, Hir Becken went out to sea to purchase food.

"I have a special treat for you," Pops said. "For being such a smart girl."

She almost burst apart with joy. She only got presents on her birthdays, and only then if Pops remembered. She snatched the paper sack out of his hands.

There, nestled in the bag, were a pair of oversized goggles and a small canister.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's a facemask," he said, pushing it over her face. The goggles were too large, the edges hanging out over her temples, the rubber straps yanking cruelly on the back of her hair. "Here, hook this up to the oxygen tank."

She tried to take them off, but Pops forced her hands away. "Hir Becken can—"

"We don't need Hir Becken. Just try swimming for a bit."

He led her over to the pool under the couch and pulled her dress over her head. It was chilly, and she shivered miserably.

"Go on," he said, after he'd tied a rope belt around her waist. "Get in."

"Don't want to."

"Doesn't matter," he said, smacking her on the butt hard enough to sting. "Get a move on."

Reluctantly, she dangled her feet in the water. It was so cold her chest hitched. The narrow pool was barely as big as her hips; even though just her calves were in, she already felt like a cork in a drain. "Pops, I don't want to—"

He shoved her in.

"Atta girl," he said, as she spluttered, her hands scrambling for purchase on the cold concrete. "Now get under."

She felt the pressure of his hand on her head as salt water filled her mouth. It felt like drowning. Her whole body trembled with panic at the idea of taking in a breath under water, and the big mask leaked so much that when she did finally suck in air, it was like trying to breathe with a showerhead shooting water up her nose. She struggled to the surface.

"Pops!" she said. "I want to—"

"Look," he said. "I'm too big to go. *So learn.*" And he pushed her under again.

It was like drowning. Her lungs burned with salt water as the ocean squirted into her eyes, filling up the bottom of the mask; she only had half a breath before it filled up with water. He pushed her down.

"Good," Pops said once she'd stopped struggling. "Now go to the caverns and get the money."

"But—"

"He wants you to have it!" Pops assured her, looking so intense she was afraid of what would happen if she said no. "So what if you get it a little prematurely? It'll save us, Evelyn. Just go."

She tried to chart a course to Hir Becken's sleep-room, but she couldn't get there from here. There wasn't enough space to turn herself around, and she couldn't swim backwards all the way to the cavern. She said as much.

"No worries, love," he said, hoisting her out of the hole. She took a breath of air, grateful to be out—and then he flipped her over and plunged her back in headfirst before she knew what he was doing.

She flailed, her elbows banging painfully on the jagged rock, cuts ablaze with ribbons of salt as she shrieked for air.... But she was jammed in, the rocks tight as a girdle, and she couldn't back out with her feet sticking out the top.

You either breathe or you drown, she thought.

Oddly, that calmed her. All her girlishness seemed to float away as she realized that she had to get air, now. Pops wouldn't save her.

Shivering with cold, she clasped the mask to her face. It was already two-thirds filled with water, but her nose was in the air part because she was upside-down. Still, every breath invited more water in.

Her torn-up arms throbbed as she felt the ice slow her heart. No ideas came. She was going to drown.

Stupid girl, she thought. *Stupid, stupid girl....*

Just before she sucked in that final, fatal breath of water, Evelyn whooped out the bad air through her nose—and the pressure blew the water out of the mask. For a moment, everything was clear. And then the water trickled back in.

That was the trick, though: exhale through your nose. Clear the mask.

Blinded by silt, she felt her way forward. She could feel the water pressing against the hollows of her throat, cold currents tickling her naked back.

If she came up empty-handed, Pops would send her back down.

The cave walls were slick with seaweed, but were still hard enough to bloody her knees. Whenever she kicked, she stubbed her toes against jagged rock. Her head cracked against a stalactite, and when she flinched away, her strap caught in the seaweed. The mask tugged free, and for a dreadful moment she flailed in the lightless water before she mashed it against her face, and sucked in precious air.

She *thought* she was going deeper, towards Hir Becken's sleep-room, but her eyes returned nothing but blackness. Muffled gurgles echoed back at her from the tight walls.

Evelyn tugged herself down the tunnels, slow and clumsy, small currents bumping her into walls. How did Hir Becken race through these corridors? What was he like down here?

She imagined those suckered fingers touching her shoulder to get her attention, and even in the chill water she felt her cheeks burn with shame. Hir Becken shouldn't see her like this, crying into her mask.

Eventually, her hand reached out to stir nothing but more water, and she almost yelped with joy. This had to be the cavern. She flipped around, facing the right way, knowing she was halfway back to air.

Now where did he keep the money?

She skimmed the walls like a suckerfish, her hands sinking into gelatin eggs, her fingertips nicked on the edges of clamshells. Her wrists entangled in a small net. All of them were Hir Becken's

treasures, secret and sodden, and she felt like a thief. Were those eggs its children? Was that net its bed?

Her hands pressed against a metal box encrusted with barnacles.

It had a latch she couldn't open, but it was good enough—she cradled it in her arms, feeling the weight of it bob in the water. She scissored her legs and slammed into a rock, gouging her head open; she felt the warm pulse of her own blood drifting against her numbed skin.

She darted back up the hole, eager for air, holding the box ahead of her like a shield. She felt a splash as it grew heavy, and realized that her arms, now battered senseless, had emerged from the water. Her father plucked the box from her hands and flung it to one side before hauling her out like today's catch.

She tore off her mask; air had never tasted sweeter.

Pops rubbed her down with a towel, forcing warmth into her limbs, muttering, "My sweet, brave girl. It must have been so bad down there."

She burst into tears.

Lovingly, he dried her off as best he could, though Evelyn noted with a dim pride that the white towel was blotted red.

"My brave soldier." He smiled, as if anyone would cry after that kind of ordeal. And though she felt awful, there was a kind of bitter triumph in that awfulness—she'd done what had to be done. "You saved us, sweetie. We'll have a home. We'll never have to leave."

He picked the box up off the floor, and she felt a sting of guilt.

"Will the money—"

"It's enough," he said, misunderstanding. "For the rest of our lives."

"But we...we *had* a home. Hir Becken—"

He shook his head sadly. "Outsiders lie, honey. We'd have worked for years and then.... He would have found some other girl. It's what they do. Come on, we have to go."

He wrapped her in a thick blanket and led her out of the junkyard, telling her over and over what a hero she was. "You just won me the jackpot," he promised. "This is enough for two or three good homes."

But all she wanted was the junkyard.

Her legs were cramped painfully by the time they checked into the best hotel in town. Pops pressed handfuls of glistening coins into the hands of the uniformed bellmen, then carried her up to the room like a bride.

"Is this our new home?" she asked as he tucked her in. She was exhausted; cold water and panic had sucked the life out of her.

"No, sweetie," he said, pushing a pillow under her head. "We'll stay here until I can get tickets for offworld. When you wake up, we'll choose a planet."

She tried to appreciate her new, pretty room, but within moments she was asleep.

When she woke, the sun was bright and Pop was snoring in the other room, head thrown back, dressed in a crisp new suit with the price tag sticking out from under his sleeve. She could smell the sickly-sweet whiskey smell seeping out from his pores.

There, on the burnished wood of the dining table, was Hir Becken's box.

Evelyn froze. Its existence was an accusation, proving that she'd done it; she'd stolen Hir Becken's money. And now she and Pops were going to live a dream while Hir Becken would lose all his secret passages, and...

...it didn't seem fair.

She was creeping towards the box.

This is wrong, she told herself, even as her fingers closed around the handle. But it wasn't Pops' money—it was Hir Becken's money, and it wasn't right that they'd taken it. Pops should see that.

She felt sick. She'd stolen from Hir Becken, and now she was stealing from Pops. Was that what it meant, choosing a family?

By the time she got back to the junkyard, box in hand, her feet were blistered. She'd wandered for hours, afraid to ask for directions lest Pops track her back. He'd be mad, real mad, and, after the way he'd shoved her under last night, she no longer trusted him.

She buzzed her way into the yard. There was Hir Becken, whiskers twitching with delight.

"You have the it?" it trilled. "You have the my box?"

"Yes."

"How did the you—"

"I swam."

It cocked its head. "The you asked to do this?"

"No," she said, and felt angry that Hir Becken would think that. "Pops made me."

"Ah," it said, swallowing its embarrassment. She felt a peculiar sense of pride at having outfoxed Hir Becken, even if she had brought back the money. "The I did not think any human could swim down to the there."

"Pops made me," she said again, softer, pleading. "I didn't want to."

Its eyes were dry with exhaustion. "Then the you are choosing to be with—"

"I'm not choosing to be with anyone," she said, blushing. "It's just your box, is all."

It bowed graciously. "The you chose," it said, brightening. "The you does not know it yet."

Together, they opened the box. It was empty.

Evelyn ran her hands along the insides in disbelief, searching foolishly for invisible money. Had Pops put the cash in his pocket? Did she need to go back?

"It is as the I expected," Hir Becken said sadly, slouching back into the pool.

And with that, she knew. She'd been trying so hard to fool herself, and felt shamed for bringing this stupidity back to Hir Becken.

Pops had a new suit, and a new hotel room, and lots of booze. She'd known, even then. And even though she'd watched him spend tons of money at The Tables, until now she'd always thought there was some limit on how much he could give away.

But now she knew the truth: Pops could lose any amount of money. All it took was a night.

She stared, dully, at the inside of the box, trying to will the cash back to Hir.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"The I will have to return," it said, its throat gurgling with a sound she'd never heard before. "The junkyard, back to the bank. The I, back to the sea."

"Take me—" She stopped, swallowed, felt the dumbness of the words surging within her. "Take me with you."

"I would not," it said, stroking her cheek again. "The sea is for the homeless. A home is not filled with the dreadful predators,

all spiked with the teeth and claws. The home is not vast and filled with the enemies who eat the me. The home is not sick with death. No, I will return to the sea, and be swallowed up."

She started to cry.

"But where will I go?"

"The you will choose," it said. It flipped over backwards, then vanished into the depths with a wriggle of its flippers. She stared into the water.

She could go back to Pops. He probably wasn't up yet; she could smuggle the box back into the room, and smile big when he woke up, and listen to his endless excuses about how those awful men had cheated him at cards.

She smiled, practicing. It felt like she was carving lines into her cheeks, stiff and painful.

She thought of enduring Pops, hearing him blather about how it all was the fault of all the other men, and how she'd have to agree with him in order to live with him. And when she imagined it, really envisioned that future, she vomited the thin remains of last night's dinner into the pool.

She stirred the water, breaking up the strands of vomit, mixing them away until the pool ran clear again. And then she went back to the front gates and gathered up her things: the heavy apron; the leather gloves; the scratched goggles.

Evelyn would stay.

Quietly, she made her way into the depths of the junkyard, stumbling along the nail-strewn pathways until the brick factory disappeared behind heaps of metal, searching for a place that would serve as a house.

The new owner would be cruel, of course; banks always were. But she knew the junkyard better than anyone, and she was pretty sure she could find enough thrown-away stuff for clothing, and boil mushrooms, and hide from anyone who came looking for her.

She was sick of moving. So she would grow old here. The new owners would hunt her down with dogs and heat trackers, but with every day she'd grow better at hiding, and they'd eventually give up and accept the ghost in their ruins. It would be tough, she knew, but that was the way of things.

She would be Evelyn, Queen of the Junkyard.

She found an old ice cream truck with a rotting seat cushion—good enough for tonight. It dribbled rusted water down her neck, the night's rain filtered through the twists of girders above.

She hugged her knees, her cheeks running with tears. This was all the family she had, now: this cold, cold metal.

Annicca

Ian McHugh

I tippy-toe past the mats on the blokes' side of the meditation hall. This time of morning, most are empty. The sheilas' side's full, same as most sessions. I dunno why there's such a difference, but even at Compulsory, the sheilas are all there before even half the blokes have dragged our sorry arses in.

The cement floor's cold enough to make my feet ache through my socks.

A couple of Managers sit up the front of the hall, side-on so they can watch our comings and goings. Their blue overalls stick out like dogs' balls with all our orange. One's watching me. My eyes flicker past his, quick, so as not to cop a scalding. Pol Pot, I call that one. Nasty bloody piece of work, he is.

I tell myself not to, but I can't help a quick peek across the strip of blue carpet that divides the blokes' side from the sheilas'.

She's still in the nest-building stage, up on a pile of cushions like the princess with the pea, with a rolled-up blanket under each knee, still learning how to sit cross-legged for an hour at a stretch. She's bundled up in blankets like everyone else, just her head sticking out the top. Her eyes are squeezed shut; she's pushing out her bottom lip. Beautiful, big, pouty lips.

Hot Lips, is how I think of her. It's a kick in the guts, every time I look at her, but I can't help myself.

I pull my blanket over my back at the same time as I sit on my cushion. I've been doing Practice long enough that my arms and legs just flop into place, natural as jelly in a mould.

"Just observe," the guru says in Discourse. "*Annicca*. Remain equanimous. *Annicca*."

Annicca, which means, 'everything ends'.

Hold your Practice for an hour—the guru calls it 'Strong Determination'—and your implant warms up the back of your neck to tell you you've just shaved sixty minutes off your sentence.

I shut my eyes, and begin.

Practice starts up on top of your head, at the spot that didn't have any bone when you were born. You concentrate on that spot until you can feel what's happening on the skin—if it's itching, hot,

cold, whatever. Then you work your way, a bit at a time, around the rest of your head, your ears, face, neck, down your back and front, your arms, and down each leg to your toes. Then you start over from the other end. You're supposed not to think about anything else while you do it. And you're not supposed to move: not to scratch an itch, give your back a rest, work some life back into a dead leg, nothing.

I don't usually try for the hour at First Voluntary, just a quick once-over and then I'm out of there. I reckon it's a nice way to start the day. If you try too hard to work your hours down, you just burn yourself out. I tend to save my Strong Determination for Compulsory, when I'm stuck in the meditation hall for an hour anyway.

This morning I can't even manage a once-over. I haven't, since Hot Lips showed up. With my eyes shut, I see a pale face with big dark lips grinning at me in the glare of headlights. I can hear her voice singing off-key with the car radio. Silent meditation is hell when you've got Billy Ray Bloody Cyrus stuck in your head. The muscles down the left side of my back screw themselves in knots.

Up front, someone gets up. I crack my eyelids. It's Pol Pot. The bastard's looking straight back at me, so I drop the shutters, quick. The sound of his fat thighs rubbing his pants together fills the hall as he walks along the carpet. I wait a few more minutes, then shrug off my blanket and get up myself.

I turn towards the sheilas' side as I go. Hot Lips' eyes are open, watching me sideways. They lock on mine, as dark as the ones I remember. Almost too long, before we both look away. A ten-day penalty, as well as the scalding, for contact with a prisoner of the opposite sex.

My heart's banging as I hurry out of the hall. I stop outside and take a couple of deep breaths to slow myself down. The sky's getting bright, but dawn's still a good half hour away. The maggies are just warming up. The only sound apart from the birds is the crunch of the dirt track under my rubber clogs.

I stop in at the toilet block. Someone's having a shower. There usually is, this time of day. The lights have timed out, but the room's lit by the Tastic over the middle cubicle. I sit for a while on the loo, too uptight to get anything out. When I close

my eyes, I see a sheila lying on gravel, all curled up like a baby. Her skin shines white in a car's headlights.

Annicca, I tell myself.

The Tastic shuts off while I'm washing my hands. Whoever-it-is is still under the water, so I turn it back on for them before I leave. I'm too fidgety to go back to bed, but I don't feel like trudging back up past the meditation hall to the walking area, either.

The breakfast bell sounds while I dither about, making my decision for me. I join the procession down to the bridge over the fishpond, to wait, on the big, odd-shaped deck, for the Managers to open the mess.

I queue with the rest of the blokes for porridge and stewed prunes. I leave it on the table nearest the window, claiming my place while I make a cuppa and grab a couple of pieces of toast. Most blokes do the same. Routine is what fills up your day, and gets you through. We crowd around the bench, reaching past each other for cups, knives, tea bags, spoons, honey, Vegemite, butter, and mostly manage it without getting in each other's way.

One bloke gets a bump on the elbow as he tries to extract himself. His toast hits the floor.

"Shit," he says, unthinking.

The bloke who bumped him apologises, just as instinctive.

Everyone else winces. Both of them clench their teeth and lift up on their toes, as their implants scald all their nerve ends at once. It's the sort of thing that happens now and then. Funny how that kind of reflex speech doesn't go away, even after you get to the point where, when you go to speak on purpose—like if you go to the Speaking Room to ask something from a Manager—you have to squeeze the words past the lump of fear in your throat.

The tables are lined parallel to the windows, with a bench on either side. Everyone faces the windows, except for one little Indian bloke, who sits in the corner looking baffled. I haven't thought of a good name for him, yet. Not-Apu.

The smoke from yesterday's bushfire is still hanging around, blocking the view across the valley. I eat the Vegemite toast first, then the porridge, then the honey toast, then take my tea outside onto the balcony. A bloke shuffles over to make space on a bench. The smoke's thick enough to put a haze between us and the trees that run out to the edge of the cliff, half a kay away.

Sackcloth hangs between the sheilas' half of the balcony and ours. I can hear a few of them moving about. I wonder if Hot Lips is one of them. My tea feels like it's clogging my throat, too thick and milky.

Annicca. I concentrate on the view of the treetops marching off into the smoke.

After breakfast, I take a shower and join the row of blokes at the washbasins, shaving or cleaning their teeth. I brush mine, then take a minute to comb a few flecks of dandruff out of my beard. I've been letting it grow since the last time the barber came. My hair's dark, but my whiskers grow salt-and-pepper. It makes me look older. There's grey in my hair now, too, that wasn't there when they put me away. Today my eyes look bashed-in.

I drop my wash things back at the cell, hang my towel on the line outside. My cellmate, Taine, is back in bed, the blanket tucked under his arm. A Hei-tiki's eyes cover his shoulder blades. He reminds me of an All-Blacks captain from when I was a kid. I remember him leading the haka: *Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora, ka ora!*

Our cell's two by three metres, one in a row of five along this side of C Block. It's got a column heater on the wall, a curtain across the sliding glass door, and our two beds. Spare overalls and undies go in the drawers under the beds. A wooden veranda runs the length of the building and keeps the sun out.

With his neck bent forward, Taine's implant sticks up under his skin, an inch-long lump at the bottom of his skull.

In winter, I'd find him standing with his back to the heater, which came on three hours a day in the cold. He'd shuffle over to give me room and we'd stand, arses and legs pressed to the heater, shoulders against the wall, to catch the warm on our backs. After a while, we'd both turn around, pressing the front of our thighs against the metal, just cool enough to rest bare hands on top.

I slide the flyscreen shut and head back up the path past the meditation hall. I need to walk.

A couple of Managers stand at the edge of the hall's veranda, catching some morning rays. Pol Pot's one of them. I can feel his eyes on me.

I used to think three months in here would beat doing the last eighteen of my sentence in general population, hands down. But no talking, no writing, no books, papers, mags, no web, no TV,

music, eye contact, *sign language*, and all you're left with is yourself, and what you've done, and Achy Breaky Bloody Heart.

It was the dope, the grog. A mistake. I didn't know what I was doing. Excuses don't cut it when you've got no one to give them to.

The walking area's a patch of bushland that goes out to the perimeter, criss-crossed with little tracks that go down then up the sides of a steep gully. I choose one that goes around the end of the gully and up over the crest on the other side.

I can see the white posts of the perimeter through the trees. The edge of the cliff's only about a hundred metres further on. There's no wire between the posts. Over the other side, where there's no cliffs, razor wire keeps the tourists out, outside our perimeter and out of our sight.

Every so often, someone will go galloping down this hill and straight between the posts, thinking to throw himself off the edge. The place takes some blokes that way, especially early on. They don't often get more than twenty metres past the perimeter before their implant puts them on the ground. The Managers don't go and get them unless they keep crawling for the cliff, so they flap about and scream until they can drag themselves back inside. Then the Managers check them over and take them down to the infirmary if they've hurt themselves. I saw one bloke who bit halfway through his tongue. I didn't see him again. They must have taken him back to general pop.

The path ends at a t-junction. One side goes across into the sheilas' compound. A wooden sign stands at the border: *Go No Further. Women's Area.* A dirt road runs through on the other side, blocked with a metal gate. Hot Lips is leaning on it.

Panic puts a chokehold on my throat. I'm about to turn away, hurry off, when she looks around. For the second time that morning, we almost get ourselves scalded. She looks away in time. Neither of us moves.

Then she steps suddenly towards me, making me jump. She stops at the boundary sign, and closes her eyes, and starts to turn on the spot. I know I should go, but it's an invitation I can't pass up.

I dunno how close the similarity is, really, now I'm looking at her up close. Maybe I've just been seeing what I wanted to see. She's average height, carrying a bit more weight than she should.

Her posture's good, spine straight. She holds her shoulders back to show off her tits. Her hips are square. The body I remember is longer, leaner. Her skin's darker than I remember, like milky tea. Her nose is thinner, I think, her face more square. Her lips are fat and wide and dark—Hot Lips. Those are just the same. She's got crow's feet by her eyes, laughter lines around her mouth. I don't remember those, either, but my memories are all from the darkness of one dope-and-grog-hazed night.

I wonder what she's in for.

She finishes her circle, opens her eyes. A smile curves those big fat lips. *My turn.* She's waiting for me. My mouth's dry as sandpaper as I shut my eyes.

I spin too far, end up sideways to her.

The smile's a grin, now. She gives her arse an extra bit of swing as she walks away.

It's a while before I shift myself. What we've just done muddles up in my head with flashes of glare and shadows, wrestling, fighting, sex, until I dunno where I am. I've gone about a dozen paces up the hill when the crying comes on, bending me over like I'm going to puke, strong enough that I have to sit down.

I'm all the way back in the dark. The lights shine on a sheila's bare arse and legs as she lies on her side. Her dress is pulled up around her ribs. She's got scratches and scrapes all over her skin. I can hear her crying over the idle of the car's engine. My head spins. My lip stings where she hit me.

I put my head on my knees, grab my hair, like if I pull it out at the roots, it'll pull all the memories out with it.

Annicca, I tell myself. *Annicca, annicca.* It's like drinking a cupful of dust.

- - -

Pol Pot's loitering at the edge of the walking area.

My ribs won't expand to let me get breath. I look away, make to walk past, but he holds up a hand to stop me and I know for sure that we're busted. *How? Why the hell didn't we get scalded?* I stare at the cleft in his chin. It disappears when he smirks.

He holds up his hand again, index finger up. He wags it from side to side, then closes his fist. He could talk, but it's obviously too much bloody fun not to. He extends all five fingers, closes them again, repeats. Then twice more.

III

Twenty days. The bastards are giving us twenty days. It should only be ten. The rules say ten. I open my mouth, close it again. Arguing about it'll just earn me ten more. I dig my fingernails into my palms.

Annicca.

He watches me for a while, then he holds up his other hand, shows me his remote. *Vicious fuck.* He points it at me.

A scalding's like the Chinese burns you give each other as kids, only inside and out, from the top of your scalp to the tips of your fingers and the soles of your feet, and straight down the middle, from your teeth to your arsehole, at the same time. It's gone as fast as it comes. There's no damage done, they say; the implant just fools you into thinking there's pain everywhere.

I try my damndest to keep it off my face, but the shock lifts me up on my feet. The thought of him doing the same thing to Hot Lips makes me angry enough to kill. I imagine myself punching his nose until it's flat, smashing his smug face into the middle of his head.

He points. "Tank."

My legs don't want to do their job, but buggered if I'll let myself stumble. It's only a short walk to the round block beside the meditation hall. Pol Pot unlocks a door, still smirking as he waves me inside with the remote. I step into a pie-slice cement cell. The door swings shut behind me, bolts clunk. I'm in darkness.

I put out a hand to find a wall, set my back against it and slide down. Eyes open or shut, it doesn't matter. I can't get rid of the vision of him scalding her. The sheila in my imagination is somewhere between Hot Lips and the other I remember. She must be in the Tank, too. Billy Ray mocks me from the blackness. I pound my fists on the floor until they hurt.

Annicca. Everything ends. *Bloody please.*

Faintly, I hear the bell for First Compulsory.

Well, what the hell else am I going to do? I assume the position. My arse is numb already, sitting on the hard cement. My back hurts. *Annicca.* *And fuck you, anyway.*

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Compulsory always starts with a recorded Discourse from the guru. I must've heard all of them at least a dozen times. Discourse is followed by a few minutes of the guru's chanting. I can imagine his voice clearly, slow and deep. It drowns out Billy Ray. I know the words off by heart, not that I've got a clue what

they mean, since he's singing in some Hindu jabber. There's one particular tape where the guru has a coughing fit, about three quarters of the way through. There's a tickle in my throat when I get to that part.

I do Practice once over from head to toe, then back again, holding my concentration in spite of the dead pain in my arse. *Just observe. Remain equanimous.* Then I sweep through my body, like my mind's a CAT scan taking pictures of myself in hundreds of little slices.

My hands are clasped in my lap, so that my palms face each other. When I sweep, I can feel energy jump the air gap between them. I imagine a beam of light shining up from the top of my skull. I dunno where it's shining to. I just hope it's taking all the shit away.

A memory floats up, a recent one.

I was standing on the deck outside the mess one day, early for a meal. Taine and a couple of other blokes were settled in by the fishpond, dangling their legs over the water while the carp came up in their shadows to blow them kisses.

A maggie caught my eye, chasing something through the grass. At first I thought it was a cricket: it was light brown and hopped away with a chirp when the bird pecked at it. The maggie watched where it landed, then ran after and pecked it again. This time I got a better look as it jumped and realised it was a little frog. They did the same routine a couple times more, until the frog was too injured to hop. It thrashed about and chirped while the maggie pecked it. The frog was still moving, so the maggie picked it up by the head and gave it a shake.

Then, with the frog in his mouth, the bird stopped and looked up at me. Checking whether I was planning to pinch his meal, maybe. He walked a little way away, looked back again, and decided I was still too close, so he ran off down the path and ducked behind a tree to eat his lunch.

I'm the maggie. This time I'm not crying for me.

I feel the warmth in the back of my neck.

Annicca.

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- - -

It's a while longer before they let me out. When the door swings open, light blinds me. I cover my eyes against the glare. A

hand hooks my armpit. The Manager has me on my feet before I realise it's not Pol Pot.

"Come on."

He shoves me out the door, turns me onto the path around the meditation hall. My eyes are watering. My legs are numb. I try to see if they're taking Hot Lips out of the Tank at the same time. The Manager catches me looking and twirls his finger in the air. *Turn around.*

Pins and needles start in my feet. He has to hold me up, all the way back. We're at the fishpond before I realise we've gone past the cellblocks. He doesn't stop, and I realise lunch must be on. He lets go of me at the doorway.

I can feel the other blokes' eyes on me as I get myself a plate and cutlery. They would've noticed I was missing from Compulsory. There's not much left of the meal, the usual brown slop of dhal. I scrape up three-quarters of a plateful and go straight outside to the balcony.

Taine's out there, finishing his cuppa. He waits until I've choked down my dhal, then reaches under his seat and brings out a plate with two muffins on it. He puts it on the bench between us. The cheeky bugger's saved me some dessert.

I choose one. He has the other. I want to cry again, but I can't keep a smile off my dial. A maggie arrives to scavenge leftovers. Taine tips out the muffin crumbs for him as he leaves. He's a good bloke. I'd like to know his real name.

I toss the last of my muffin to the maggie. *Thanks, bird.*

The smoke's cleared a bit and I can see the white sails of the wind farm across the valley. I feel shaky, but okay. I sit a while longer, then go back to the cell to collect my toothbrush, and wander over to the toilet block.

A Manager sprints past.

It's the bloke who got me out of the Tank. I see another running between the cellblocks further away. Heading for the sheilas' compound. They only run when someone's gone through the perimeter and not stopped.

Oh, no.

I break into a run. Up around the meditation hall, down the gully, and back up the other side. Down to the corner that abuts the sheilas' area.

My lungs burn; my legs shake. I still have my toothbrush.

I can see blue overalls through the trees. They're a long way away, close to the edge. A couple of other blokes arrive. There's a clump of sheilas over their side, by the gate. Hot Lips isn't one of them.

It's a long while before the Managers come back. They don't come into the compound, but skirt the perimeter, a distance away. I can't see any orange among them, only blue.

They've left a couple of their number by the cliff. A while later, a rescue chopper thumps overhead.

- - -

Her place is empty at Second Compulsory. So is Pol Pot's. Did he tell her why I'm in? Is that what pushed her over?

During Discourse, the Manager who fetched me from the Tank squats beside my mat. "Come to the Speaking Room after the session," he says.

Not my fault, I want to shout. Not my fault this time.

- - -

The sun angles across the mess hall balcony, up to my chest when I sit on the bench. I kick off my clogs and warm my feet on the boards. There's bits of cloud over the valley. Shafts of sunlight shine through.

I pick up my orange, peel the rind with my fingernails. My hands shake, but I go slow and get the rind off in one long strip, without digging into the flesh. Then I pluck off the pith, and split the orange into quarters.

In my mind's eye, she's facing me. I look at her mouth. Those big lips curve into a smile. Then I see her lying at the bottom of the cliff, all broken up. She looks surprised. Her face twists, turns into a different expression, a snarl of anger and fear. It stretches into a scream.

Everything ends, except for that.

Juice spatters the boards between my feet. Sheilas walk by, underneath. I can see them through the gaps in the wood.



Mystif Eye

Andy B. Clarkson

Who You Talking To, Zone?

Bob Tippee

I seen you now, but you still ain't talking. I seen you ducking around the corner of the Blood Bank when you didn't think nobody was watching. How come you don't talk no more?

—Zone, who's that you're talking to down there?

Oh shit.

—Morning, Miss Buttercup.

—Who you calling 'Miss Buttercup'?

Looking up over slanting concrete with morning sunlight glittering below shadows at the bottom of the bridge, not seeing nothing. Cars and trucks rumbling over fast up there where a man can't see. Too early for Buttercup to be up. Usually a man can scoot himself past the Third Street underpass and not have her hollering down at him.

—Don't know your real name. Can't see you nohow.

—It's on account of I don't want you knowing my name or seeing me neither one.

—Yes, ma'am. I'll be moving along now.

—Well you better be moving your butt over to check on Mouthwash. I hear he had himself an accident.

—Yes, ma'am. I'll check on Mouthwash.

In a hurry, a man ought to be checking Mouthwash and getting away from a woman living under a bridge not wanting nobody to see her.

—Zone.

Oh shit.

Turning around, looking up at a bunch of concrete nothing with shadows on top.

—Yes, ma'am.

—What were you throwing into them weeds other side of the underpass?

—Just some old junk, ma'am. I'll be checking Mouthwash now.

—Zone.

Oh shit.

—What you got in that greasy old sack?

—Cans, ma'am. Guess I'll be—

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—Don't be calling me 'Buttercup' again. Hear?

—No, ma'am.

- - -

Jimmy'll know what to do about Mouthwash. Jimmy's got him a camper. A red one. Parked this morning in the Grace Presbyterian Church parking lot. Different place each day.

—Pretty early for you to come knocking, Zone.

Looking quick and distant, eyes zipping this way and that like beetles just hatched out of his beard, shaving cream covering half his head, other half shiny, plastic razor in one hand.

—Mouthwash had him an accident. Buttercup says so.

—I'd welcome you inside, but there's not much room. What kind of accident?

—Don't know. Maybe them kids again, drinking, cruising around, beating folks up.

—Let me finish here. We'll go find Mouthwash.

Asphalt in the morning smells like the oak and pine trees throwing streaky shade across the parking lot like a giant's fingers. Later it'll just smell like asphalt.

—I don't think it's the kids, Zone.

It's like the camper's talking, Jimmy back inside, shaving the rest of his head.

—Gerome, Shorty, Gimp. They all left on account of they got beat up by them kids. And now Mouthwash.

It's like talking to a camper.

—They ever beat you up, Zone?

A camper asking questions.

—Don't remember.

—Seems like getting beat up would be kind of hard to forget.

What's a man supposed to say, he can't remember something when about all he can remember is the ward, the damn ward with its locked doors and too-small windows?

—Seems like.

Jimmy stepping out now, wiry eyebrows high over them blackberry eyes of his, looking around again, looking around hard.

—Care if we walk?

Turning fast toward a hole in the vine-tangled chain-link fence, a shortcut to the empty strip center where Mouthwash stays.

—Zone, I don't think you've got to worry about those kids. Most folks don't come around this part of town more than once. It's what I like about it.

—I hope, Jimmy. Long as you and Mouthwash are here.

Squeezing through the hole in the fence, wading through weeds in the field behind the strip center, ankles soaked after a few steps.

—Jimmy?

—Yeah, Zone.

—How come you shave your head but not your face?

Him chuckling.

—You're sharp today, Zone.

Jimmy turning serious.

—You know, there's folks that'd—well, I just got to be careful.

- - -

Mouthwash lying in a nest of Burger-King wrappers in front of the inset door of a boarded-over deli, head on a pile of newspapers, cuddling a bottle of Thunderbird with two swallows left inside. Rolling over now from the shaking Jimmy gives him, looking from the neck up like a skull with a gray beard, spotted purple. A skull with one eye swollen shut.

—Leave me alone.

Jimmy shaking his head.

—Suits me. Your breath's a damn fire hazard.

Leaving not suiting a man who remembers enough not to like what he forgot.

—Them kids again?

Mouthwash up on one elbow, feeling that angry eye with his free hand.

—Ran into a lamppost.

Jimmy laughing.

—Must've been running downhill to do that much damage. Want to go to the clinic?

Mouthwash shaking his head, burping.

—How'd you know?

—Buttercup heard you had an accident. Hollered at me this morning. Scared the shit out of me.

Jimmy standing up.

—You afraid of that old whore, Zone?

Mouthwash grunting, pushing himself up high enough to sit.

—Who says she's an old whore?

Jimmy crossing his arms, looking smart.

—Women don't live under bridges unless they're whores too old to work.

—What about men who live in campers?

Car coming up. Police car. Jimmy's head snapping up.

—Let me do the talking.

Police car stopping. Door opening, shutting. Blue-uniformed cop getting out, tall and dark-skinned, strong-looking guy, putting on his hat, adjusting his gun belt. Sergeant Bailey.

—What's the matter here, Zone?

Jimmy interrupting.

—We're just trying to help—

—Who're you?

—My name's William Fuller, and I'm just—

—Save it. Nobody around here uses his real name. What's wrong with Mouthwash? Besides the bust-head wine, I mean.

Mouthwash answering.

—Ran into a lamppost.

—You'd tell me if it was those kids again, wouldn't you?

Sometimes a man has to speak up.

—I'd tell you first thing. Don't want no more of them kids.

—Good man, Zone. You doing okay? Hearing those voices anymore?

—No, man. No voices.

—Doing what the doctor told you? Taking the meds?

—Ain't going back to that ward, Sergeant.

Sergeant Bailey nodding, hiking up his gun belt again.

—You gentlemen take care of yourselves. Pleasure to meet you, Mister Fuller. Plan on staying on these streets awhile?

Jimmy—William Fuller—smiling, shrugging.

—'Til I get on my feet. Just got a job.

Sergeant Bailey walking back to his car, talking over his shoulder.

—Good thing to have—a job. Make any trouble down here and I'll crack your head like a walnut.

—Yes, sir.

Car starting, moving off. Me and Mouthwash asking at the same time.

—A job?

—Captain's Table, bussing tables. I can get away with left-overs. You guys don't be telling anybody.

- - -

Hope you don't mind I only talk to you when I'm alone. Thing is, folks get peculiar ideas, they see a man talking to somebody they can't see. Asked about it all the time at the ward. Hear those voices now? Take this white pill. Hear those voices? Time for the orange pill. Damn ward. No way out until you weren't talking no more. I'm out; you still ain't talking. I figure it was them pills.

I'd have me a job bussing tables if somebody'd hire me. Bussing tables and having a little money and some leftovers. Hiked all the way to the Captain's Table a couple of times asking for work. Got me some fried shrimp but no job. Folks there called me harmless.

Don't mean to be complaining. A man can keep himself whole bagging up cans and toting them to Central Scrap if he gets him a routine and knows where to look. And if he ain't particular what he wears or eats.

All I'm particular about is staying out of that damn ward. And getting you to talk again, setting things square now I know what you look like. What you got to say about that?

- - -

—Who you talking to, Zone?

Mouthwash, stepping out of the 7-Eleven onto the dark sidewalk, eye healed to mostly open, carrying a loaf of bread in a brown sack too short and holding out a slice, saying:

—Piece of day-old?

—Thanks. You're sober.

—Working at it. Working at it hard.

Street lamps lighting Third Street. Bread tasting good, no matter how old.

—Answer me this, Zone: How much you know about Jimmy, or William Fuller, or whatever his name is?

Offering a man another piece of bread.

—Thanks. He's got him a camper and a job. I'd have me a camper if I could. Job, too.

—He's been hanging around Buttercup.

—Ain't no man who knows what she done in Joplin be hanging around that woman.

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—You're right about that, Zone. But she saw somebody down on the underpass sidewalk.

—That was me. Told me you had an accident.

Shaking his head, handing over another slice of day-old.

—Later. At night. Walking up and down, up and down, like he was looking for something. For her, maybe.

Chewing. Thinking. Swallowing.

—Jimmy's working nights. Don't pick him a place to park and settle down until it's real late, far as I can tell.

—That's another thing, Zone. Don't that seem peculiar? Living that way? Living on these streets? Not being a drunk or mental case? No offense.

—Jimmy gave me ride back here when I got out of the ward.

—So you're gonna take his side instead of mine?

—Didn't mean it that way, Mouthwash. Gerome, Shorty, and Gimp being gone, seems like a man ought to try to be on both sides if he can.

Mouthwash sighing, handing over three more slices of day-old.

—I'm just saying things aren't always like you think they are. But you're right. It's good being on both sides.

- - -

Things not being like you think they are. In the ward they were all the time fussing over what's real and what ain't. Saying voices ain't all the time real. But you're real. What a man sees with his own eyes is real.

—Who you talking to, Zone?

Jimmy's voice. Where's Jimmy?

Jimmy's voice on the street so late the street lamps look like they're losing their fight against the dark. Late and empty. Except for Jimmy, wherever he is.

—You like fried shrimp, Zone?

—Where you at, Jimmy?

—Over here.

Stepping out of an alley can't nobody hardly see when it's daytime, let alone now. Waving me over, disappearing again into the black. Even in the alley, a man can't see nothing.

—Good place, don't you think?

—Where you at?

Jimmy chuckling.

—See what I mean? Come ten steps this way and look left.

Jimmy's camper, backed into a side alley somebody maybe used to unload trucks for some business a long time gone. Battery lamp switching on, Jimmy leaning back against the hood of his truck, arms crossed, smiling.

—What you doing up so late, Zone?

—Walking around. Didn't reckon to find you here.

—That's what I like about the place. Look here: I got a plate of fried shrimp from the Captain's Table needs eating.

A man don't eat that good every day. Meal like that goes down quick.

—You were talking to yourself when I saw you, Zone. Those voices back that cop talked about?

—No man. No voices.

Hoping he don't ask about the meds.

—But you're worried about something.

—Ain't nothing, Jimmy.

—You can tell me.

—Something you oughta know about Buttercup.

Stuffing the plastic plate the shrimp was on into a plastic bag. Not saying nothing.

—Something she done in Joplin. Had her a husband up there. Got mad at him.

—Wives are always getting mad at their husbands. It's how wives are.

—Took her a butcher knife and cut off his business.

Jimmy coughing, shaking his head, best a man can tell with no more light than's coming from that electric lamp.

—How do you know that?

—Mouthwash told me.

—So that's how come you're scared of her.

—Damn right. I don't think a man ought to go fooling around with no woman who'd do something like that.

—You think maybe that's exactly what Mouthwash wanted you to think when he told you that story?

—Why'd he tell me something like that if it wasn't true?

Leaning close, whispering loud.

—So you wouldn't go poontanging around his girlfriend, Zone. Now, if you don't mind, I got to work the lunch shift tomorrow so I better get me some sleep.

- - -

When you talked before couldn't nobody else hear you but me.
So when I see you can't nobody else see you neither, I expect.

I seen you again. Hanging around the front of the Good Samaritan Mission while I was having me my breakfast. Same blue-jeans and black tee-shirt like before. Red baseball cap. Sunglasses. Looking like somebody trying to look like somebody just hanging around.

Gone, though, by the time I got outside. Then Mouthwash, hunkered over at the back of the parking lot.

—Mouthwash, you see that guy in black with the shades?

Shaking his head, not saying nothing.

—When'd the puking start?

—'Bout sun-up.

Heaving, heaving, nothing coming up.

—Probably folks in the Sam Mission could help you out.

Shaking his head again, hands on his knees.

—Got to do this my own way, Zone.

—Didn't know being sober was so hard.

Grinning. Grinning but wincing.

—Being sober's not hard. Being drunk's just a whole lot easier.

More heaving. More nothing coming up. Seems like a man ought to stay with somebody having so much discomfort. He ought not to let things go quiet.

—Being sober's cheaper'n being drunk.

Grinning again, hands still on those knees.

—That medicine turned you into a regular philosopher, Zone.

—Done with that medicine, Mouthwash.

—They'll give you more, you take the empty bottle back and ask.

—No they won't.

—Sure they will.

—I ain't going back. Not to that damn ward.

—You'll end up back there anyway you don't take that medicine, Zone.

—Threw the bottle away. I ain't going back.

More heaving. Groaning in between.

—Suit yourself, Zone.

More groaning. A man can tell Mouthwash stuff. A man ought to keep the quiet away while his friend's having the dry-out pukes.

—Seems like if they got day-old bread at half the price they oughta sell day-old whisky cheap, too.

- - -

Answer me this: how come somebody's got to call a man harmless who ain't never done nothing more hurtful than swat a mosquito off his own forehead?

- - -

—Who you talking to, Zone?

Jimmy, sitting the next day or maybe a day or two after that in shadows where walls of a long-gone men's store turned in from the sidewalk to the door, across from the alley where his camper's parked, like he's hiding.

—Ain't talking to nobody except myself, Jimmy. Ain't nobody left to talk to no more except you and Mouthwash. And Buttercup, of course, only I ain't getting close enough to that woman to talk to her.

Jimmy laughing, waving a man into the shadows.

—Keep your zipper shut, you'll be okay. Words to live by.

—What you doing, sitting here, staring across an old empty street like this?

—Making sure it stays empty. Hey, Zone, I been thinking: you know how Mouthwash takes up for Buttercup every time her name comes up? I got a theory, but it's going to take some proving. Can you meet me here when the sun goes down?

—I ain't going to no damn ward, Jimmy.

—Forget the ward. I'll have shrimp.

—When the sun goes down, you say?

- - -

Full of shrimp. Full of that shrimp crispy on the outside and juicy on the inside, more than a man ever had at one sitting. Jimmy calls it leftovers. A man calls it a feast.

—Where we going, Jimmy?

Feeling good. Feeling full. Feeling important somehow walking for some purpose next to Jimmy.

—You check on Mouthwash on the way over like I asked?

—Mouthwash?

—You check on him on the way over?

—I think so.

—That wasn't more than an hour ago, Zone. You can't remember that far back?

—Ain't seen Mouthwash.

—Good enough. I know where he is.

—Mouthwash don't live this direction, Jimmy.

Walking down Third Street. Walking in moonlight and light from street lamps that ain't busted. Jimmy not saying nothing.

—What we doing, Jimmy?

—I'm gonna show you it wasn't those kids who busted Mouthwash's face last week.

—I don't want to see them kids, Jimmy.

—Who said anything about seeing those kids? You've been acting confused lately. I think it's 'cause you're worried about Mouthwash getting smacked the week before last. I want to show you there's nothing to worry about.

—A man's got plenty to worry about walking under this here bridge at night.

—Keep your voice down, Zone. We're stopping right here.

—Not none of me, man.

Underpass quiet between cars and trucks. Not much traffic up top this time of night.

—Nothing to worry about, Zone. Just keep your voice down.

Jimmy looking up at where the concrete bank joins the bridge, at where Buttercup lives. Jimmy quiet the last few steps. Jimmy stepping onto the bank, leaning forward, setting his hands on the concrete, ready to climb.

—I ain't going up there, Jimmy.

Whispering now.

—Up there is right where you're going. Get your hands out of your pockets.

Oh shit.

—She cut off her husband's business, Jimmy.

Jimmy chuckling, like it's funny.

—Are you crying, Zone?

—I ain't going up there.

—Then you're gonna be scared about something you don't have to be scared about for the rest of your life.

—I ain't fooling around with Buttercup, Jimmy. You keep her.

—Me?

Jimmy laughing out loud now, pressing his palms to his mouth to muffle the sound.

—You're more confused than I thought. Maybe that cop was right. Maybe you need to go back to that hospital.

Oh shit.

—I'm coming, Jimmy.

Climbing up that concrete bank in the dark, grit scratching a man's palms, fingers, feet sliding every few steps, not wanting to go any higher, not wanting to go to the ward. How'd you get me into this?

—Who you talking to, Zone?

—Ain't hearing no voices, Jimmy.

Whispering. Whispering loud on account of now there's cars can't nobody see from here crossing the bridge. Sounding crowded up there. Not like down here where it's dark and two fools are sneaking up the gritty, warm bank to where Buttercup's probably waiting with her knife ready and Jimmy's talking about going back to the ward. That damn ward.

—What's that, Zone?

Now a man can't tell if he's talking or only thinking.

—Don't like this, Jimmy. Don't like this nohow.

—No reason to cry. Look here: almost to the top.

—Don't like this. Oh shit. Don't like this. Oh shit.

Jimmy grabbing a man's arm, stopping him from climbing, grinning in moonlight slanting in below the bridge. Pointing now. Pointing to the top of the bank where there's an open space behind. Open and dark. Dark but something glittering.

—Stay here, Zone.

Jimmy sneaking up all the way to the top, staying low. A man's got to wait. Got to wait where he don't want to be or go back down to the sidewalk and have somebody take him to the damn ward. Oh shit. Oh shit.

—Zone!

Jimmy whispering loud. Motioning with his hand to come on up. A man can only go so high. How high's a man got to go to stay out of the ward?

—Zone!

Climbing up. Climbing all the way. Thinking Buttercup ought to go to the ward. They'd maybe give her something that'd make her not want to go cutting off a man's business.

—You're talking to yourself again, Zone. Stop yourself long enough to look over that ledge. And don't worry. They're busy. They're not gonna see you.

Pulling up now. Not wanting to. Staying out of the ward. Looking over.

Candles. Down about as far as a man is high. A bunch of candles, barely lighting a space like a little concrete room, with food cans stacked on one side, a pile of clothes, a couple of suitcases.

—Look, down, Zone. Straight down.

Jimmy pointing. More candles in a little space straight below where there's a mattress. Two folks on it. Naked as babies. Busy, sure enough. Mouthwash for sure. Must be Buttercup underneath. Jimmy pointing, laughing. Man pulling himself higher, looking over. Pulling higher, looking down. Jimmy whispering:

—See that baseball bat against the boxes?

Buttercup and Mouthwash and Mouthwash acting sure enough like he's still got his business.

—See it, Zone? It was Buttercup who gave Mouthwash that nasty eye. Probably came up here drunk and pissed her off.

What are Buttercup and Mouthwash doing naked on a mattress under an old bridge?

—Is that the funniest thing you ever saw, Zone? Zone, what you doing?

—It's them shrimp, Jimmy.

—Not there! Zone, let's go. Hold it, Zone. Not over the ledge!

- - -

Just Jimmy and me now. And you. Following me along Second Street where the movie place used to be. Mouthwash gone away with Buttercup after they got puked on. Didn't mean no harm by it, but they moved away anyhow. And now you following.

You hearing me? You close enough yet?

Jimmy gets him shrimp still, asks do I want any. Hell no. Don't even want to be around nobody eating shrimp. They had shrimp in the ward. Isn't that right? Something about shrimp don't sit right. Getting hard keeping things straight.

Mouthwash got sick eating shrimp. Jimmy said Buttercup hit him upside the head with a Thunderbird bottle. No. Baseball bat. On account of he went calling on her and didn't take no cans to turn in. No cans, no money. It's the rules.

Buttercup don't want no cans. She cut off Mouthwash's business with a baseball bat. No, that ain't right. With a knife. Wait. Mouthwash said he still had his business when he came by, saying good-bye, saying he and Buttercup were moving on. Something about her not liking being puked on. Said I didn't have to worry about him losing his business.

You close enough to hear good now? Following, not caring about hiding no more. Well, talk when you've got a mind to. I've got me some figuring out to do.

What was it Jimmy said? It wasn't that Mouthwash got sick on shrimp. That wasn't Mouthwash. Mouthwash got drunk. That's it. He got drunk and went to see Buttercup and she cut off his business. No. She swatted him upside the head with her baseball bat. A woman don't like no man coming around her drunk. Must be how come Mouthwash worked so hard getting sober he threw up his guts. Or was it the day-old bread?

What you want following so close you can hear me talking, not hiding no more? You think I can't see?

What's that? Hell yes, I know who looks like that. Name's Jimmy. Been telling you about him. Ain't you been listening?

You gonna take off that hat and them shades so I can see who it is I've been talking to all this time, throwing away that empty bottle so you'd come back, everybody else leaving and all. Except Mouthwash and Jimmy and Buttercup. And now two of them gone. Know what they called you in the ward? Voices. Like there was more than one of you. They don't know shit.

What's that? I told you before where he lives, only I couldn't see you then. Red camper, parked in the alley down off First Street. He don't want you to tell nobody, though. He'll share his shrimp if he's got some. But don't be talking to me about shrimp. Buttercup, she ate some shrimp and puked all over the place. No. That ain't right. Not Buttercup. Where you going now?

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- - -

Finally talking regular again. And after running off like you did when I told you where Jimmy lived. Hope you got some shrimp.

Just you and Jimmy and me left. Got to see Jimmy now. Got to tell him I seen you.

Oh shit. Jimmy's not gonna like all these folks being in his alley. Cops. Ambulance.

—Who you talking to, Zone?

—Jimmy?

—Who?

A cop. Seems like somebody a man ought to know.

—It's me, Zone. Sergeant Bailey. I'm the one who took you to the hospital.

—You the one got beat up by them kids?

—Huh? Listen, Zone: the guy I saw you with the other day—was he living in the camper down the alley?

—Jimmy. Got to see Jimmy.

—He told me his name was William Fuller. Is Jimmy the same guy who lives down this alley in a camper?

—Jimmy gets shrimp.

—Not anymore, he doesn't. Listen, Zone: would you mind taking a look at him, telling me for sure it's Jimmy, or William Fuller, or whatever his name is? It's kind of hard—

—Why don't you ask him?

—He's dead, Zone. Somebody shot him. Here. Come with me.

A man and a cop, walking down the alley, other cops getting out of the way, staring. Sergeant Bailey, says his name is. Talking. Says he took a man to the hospital.

—Out of the way. Out of the way here. I got somebody who can ID the victim.

Jimmy's camper. Parked same as normal. Only yellow tape all around. And people. People staring.

—It's okay. Talks to himself, is all.

Around back, looking inside the camper. Blood all over. Somebody lying on the floor.

What's that you say?

—Who you talking to, Zone?

Ain't never seen so many folks staring, and now you talking again. Ain't gonna be so lonesome no more.

—Zone, you're not making any sense. I need you to tell me: is that Jimmy?

Questions. Questions. What you want to know? Cop shaking a man by the shoulder.

—Look at him, Zone. Is that Jimmy?

—Jimmy got him a face. That guy ain't got no face.

—No shit. But look at his clothes, at his shoes, at the parts that aren't shot. I need you to tell me if that's Jimmy or somebody else.

Think so? Well, if you're sure a man can't be no more sure than that.

—What are you saying, Zone?

—That's Jimmy.

—You're sure.

—Don't want no more shrimp anyhow.

Somebody tugging a man by the arm.

—Okay, that's him. Called himself 'Jimmy'. Let us through.

Won't be so lonesome now, you talking again. A man can do his work, have somebody to talk to, get him something to eat at Grace Presbyterian when the line's open, day-old bread when he's got some coin. And you to talk to.

—Zone, we'll take a ride in a minute.

Jimmy's got him a camper. A camper but no face.

—What's that about a camper, Zone? We just left the camper.

—Sergeant.

—What, Zone?

—Jimmy said ain't nobody coming around here no more.

—Looks like he was wrong. Somebody must have been around here looking for him. Hold on a second, Zone. Lieutenant, we got as good an ID on the victim as we're probably going to get, but we need to get my friend here some help. He's—well, he's a little confused. Must've quit taking his psych meds.

So answer me this: if ain't nobody coming around here no more like Jimmy said, how come a man can find him all the cans he needs?

—Don't worry, Lieutenant. He's harmless.

The Girl Who Married a Buddha

Margaret Bashaar

There is no rebellion that builds inside her
that thrusts its sharp elbows into her side.
She is the kind of girl who looks for words in smoke,
faces in grains of sand, who folds her prayers
into scraps of yellow paper, binds them with string
to wear at her throat. There are blessings for houseflies
in the tips of her fingers and in January
she prays for the hummingbirds, skin so pale
you would swear you could see into her,
deep past her ribcage.

Flowers spill from her arms like magicians' scarves
and when she closes her eyes she can feel herself
almost overflow from the top of her head,
wonders if when she does it will feel like her body
has turned inside out, suddenly raw and stinging.
The light always bends to find her, to make her glow
when she faces east, so she shaves her head to feel every breeze
like a hurricane, still wants to shut herself up in a box
when she thinks she can hear an ancient language in the wind
and she sleeps alone.

Sand Clings to My Toes, Daddy

Jim Pascual Agustin

They like you, my dear.
Your skin does not resist
being jeweled by these migrants
of boundless seas.

Your laughter
reminds them of rolling waves,
tossing, swirling
journeys with no end.

How you reduced forever
to this moment
as they glisten between your toes.

Soon you gather sand and water
in your clothes, you feel
the weight of the waves.
Laughter learns fear.

You shiver
until the next wave topples you
in hysterical giggles.

You are beginning to know
there are forces that make you small
and lift you to other shores.

Crumpled Receipts

Bryan C. Murray

The adapter I spent \$30 on is the wrong size,
which means the package it came in is also the wrong size, so
I won't rescue my music & information from this silver hard drive,
& it makes me tired thinking of the process
of returning this, & the time it'll take to get my money back,
but really I shouldn't be,
since I took my vitamins today, by alphabet,
the way my Centrum dictates,
like the body approaches nutrition in order,
the way scanners appreciate the art of stripes.
Will that be all for you today? That depends,

can I plug this bread, cheese & turkey into my tummy
to see if it works? Like most people, I don't trust return clauses.
Apparently I'm holding up the line but nobody's complaining,
secretly unbuttoning their shirts to sample milks, cantaloupes,
onions, bourbons. (The sloppy man at the back demands a refund,
but only so he can drive home.) This reminds me of the bunny I bought,
that died the first night, & was refused the next afternoon. *I don't know
where you find mannequins this small, but we don't find this amusing.*
I do understand why so many returns are refused,
because people always get carried away: men exchanging
ex-wives,

doctors calling patients back, reinserting tumors,
claiming they did better with the headaches & sympathy, wardens
shoving murderers back inside their aged mothers,
knotting their wrinkled legs like twisty ties. At this rate,
I won't get my \$30 back, nor does it seem I can jam these
prongs into the smaller holes of this computer drive.
& I wish everything I loaded into this machine
would break out, like I'm sure the warden,
listening to the echoes of his own whistling,
dreams news reports of men in prison stripes
knifing their way out of old ladies,
to come back to him, to start fresh,
now that everyone's acquainted with policy.

Doll

Marina Richards

He took her apart on a Saturday.
Pieces strewn around the shop,
gleaming,
each a memory in his head.
Under the garage door,
sunlight crept like smoke as he worked,
bit after bit.
A beauty, surely admired
and collected, forever.
This one would certainly bring offers,
of which he would take none.
Rip. Rip. Rip.

Her smell fused with Ethol.
He liked that.
He liked how she didn't stir.
He liked that no one knew,
his privacy sheltered by the garage.
Carefully, he wrapped her main part in cellophane.
She smiled at him, shiny and new.
A doll in a package,
more real than when she'd first arrived.

He took #449 Burgundy
and rubbed the mouth, careful
not to go beyond the outline of her lips.
Then, as he'd promised her,
he sprayed #449 on the Mustang.
If anything he was too good at his work.
And now he had his clear-red woman in a
shimmering crimson car to show off.

Laughter and a Pall Mall to celebrate.
Damn, but he knew how to make the customers happy.
That's why the others would be jealous, and
he couldn't wait to show off his latest masterpiece,
make them hunger for the red.

"I'm dropping off my car. It could use a paint job,"
she'd said, tossing him her keys.
"I heard you're the best."

The garage door rolled up, then down.
She, like a colored tide from the ocean,
never knew where she'd landed.
Nor could she turn back.
Or see the final color of her car.

The Last Butterfly

Lavie Tidhar

To Pavel Friedmann

'What is a man but threaded cloth,' the painter said conversationally without looking up. 'Hastily worn and discarded?'

Alena regarded him in silence. Unconsciously, she was imitating her mother, or the mother of the other Alena: the pursed lips; the hands on hips; the pose that suggested both indifference and irritation.

'I don't know,' she said. Her voice was level. 'What?'

The painter stopped and turned his face to her. On the ground where he crouched, the left hind wing of a yellow butterfly was taking shape. His face was craggy, a mountainous terrain from which his nose protruded like an ailing volcano. It dominated his face, giving him a look that was both comical and sad.

'I don't know either,' he said. 'I mean nothing.'

He looked away and continued to paint. The butterfly formed slowly, with delicate strokes: its small head was drawn on to the wall while the right fore wing touched the rubbish that had collected on the floor. It looked fractured, deformed.

The painter saw her look and shrugged. 'It's difficult to get them right under these conditions,' he said, as if that explained it.

The burst of a machine gun sounded close by. The painter shed his long, black coat and Alena took refuge under its heavy warmth. They were both hiding behind the rubbish tip; or at least, they both pretended they were hidden.

She felt warm under his coat; the painter wrapped her in it until she looked like a bundle of rags. The cold slowly dissipated from her but didn't go away. It had been around for so long she had forgotten what real warmth felt like.

'What,' the painter said in that same conversational tone, 'are these bones that lie unclaimed, upon this heath, below these streets and houses?'

There was another machine gun burst. Somewhere down the street a woman screamed before falling silent.

'Are you a German?' Alena said. She had never spoken to a German, of course, but who else would have a coat like this in winter, and who else could come and go like the painter did? And for all the sense he made when speaking, he may as well have been speaking a foreign language.

The first time she saw him she was frightened. That was two weeks before the fighting started, when people still went each day to the Umschlagplatz to board the trains that took them east.

Alena watched them board the train. She was wary of the German soldiers, who stood with guns half-raised, ensuring the transportation went smoothly. She recognised one of the women waiting for the train, a neighbour from the old house. The woman noticed her and her eyes widened. Alena felt something strange in her chest, some unknown emotion. There was something in her eye. Perhaps dust.

One of the soldiers noticed the woman's gaze and followed it. Alena ran before he saw her, although they almost never did.

She met the painter in an alleyway deep within the ghetto. He was dressed in that same dark, heavy coat, and colour came out of his hand, sunshine yellow, tree-bark green; the colours mixed and merged, bleeding into each other, and on the wall the outline of a butterfly was taking shape like a delicate scar.

She would have run but for her curiosity, which had refused to die along with the other Alena, the one who never spoke to strangers and prayed every day on time and understood things like feelings. But she was another Alena now. The old Alena had died with the butterflies and the trees.

The painter ignored her. She watched him, the narrow shape under the coat, the cratered face, the hands that moved and infused the wall with colour that made her head pound, remembering butterflies.

They didn't speak at all that first time. And the butterfly, when she returned to look for it the next day, was gone from the wall as if it was never painted. She ran her fingers over the dirty stone, feeling tiny cracks and grime and cold.

This was before the war began, before the Germans started destroying the ghetto and the man from Mila Street organised everyone into a ragtag army. Now smoke billowed constantly from burning buildings, and mortar fire met Molotov cocktails as the Germans moved in.

'Are you a German?' she said again, filling the void with another meaningless question.

The painter stopped. The yellow butterfly was nearly complete. It looked so alive Alena almost imagined that it moved.

Almost imagined. Her imagination was buried with the other her, the one that couldn't adjust, the one that wanted to die.

This Alena wanted to live.

'No,' the painter said. He scratched his nose, leaving a trail of light blue on his skin. 'Of course not.'

'Then what are you doing here?' Alena demanded. 'How did you get here? Where do you go?'

'I'm....' The painter's face crumpled; he looked like he would cry. 'I don't know. I go from nothing into nowhere. I am nobody.'

An explosion nearby shook the ground, and a shower of shrapnel hit the butterfly.

In the dead light of their hidden corner the butterfly seemed to twist and shudder. The painter sat back, his hand falling away from the almost-finished painting. His face twisted in pain.

Something ached inside Alena, like a memory of sorrow, but she suppressed it. 'Do you have any food?'

The painter sighed.

'Check my coat pockets,' he said.

The pockets were deep and bare but for one small object deep inside the left pocket. Alena withdrew it; it was a hardboiled egg. She looked at it closely, moving the egg between her palms. She put it up to her nose and smelled it, and the smell conjured up sudden images that cut at her heart like broken eggshell. It smelled of Tshulent cooking on a Friday night, and she remembered suddenly, and with a painful clarity, her old room, and the way she would wake up, early on a Shabbat morning, to find the house engulfed in the scent of the slow-cooking pot. Her mother put eggs into the pot, and when they were cracked, hours and hours later, their colour had changed to a dark brown and they tasted like no hardboiled eggs ever did.

Her tongue darted out, touched the shell, retreated. She rolled the egg again. When she broke it, at last, it was with a reverential care she found difficult to understand. She removed the shards slowly, picking them one by one off the skin until the

egg stood in her palm, naked and defenceless. It was a Tshulent egg. Her mother's Tshulent egg.

The painter was looking at her, his small eyes sorrowful beneath his shaggy eyebrows. Alena bit into the egg. It tasted salty, more so than it should, and she wondered at that even as she ate the egg with small, hungry bites.

'You're crying,' the painter said when she was finished.

Alena looked at her hands. The broken shell lay there empty and she let the shards fall quietly to the ground. She touched her eyes and felt tears.

'Something in my eye,' she said.

The painter nodded. 'The dust,' he said, and suddenly smiled. He stood up and brushed himself. 'Will you come with me?' On the wall, the unfinished butterfly was fading.

'Where?' she said.

He shrugged. 'Nowhere. Everywhere. It would all be worth it if only I could paint one true butterfly.'

Alena shook her head. 'Butterflies don't live here, in the ghetto.'

'Just one,' the painter said. He sounded desperate. 'You would like that, wouldn't you?'

'I would like it very much,' Alena said, as if speaking to a child. 'But I have never seen one. Not here. And where,' she said, 'where else is there but here?'

The painter shrugged again. He looked sad. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I don't even know if there are still butterflies.'

'I have to go,' she said. 'Thank you for the use of the coat.' She thought about it. 'And the egg.'

'Goodbye, Alena,' the painter said awkwardly. He accepted the coat back from her, folding it with care. His hands streaked paint on the soft material.

She left him then. They did not meet again. The revolt ended two weeks later; she overheard someone say it was May 16th. She wandered the ruined streets and no one noticed her.

There were people at the Umschlagplatz. A train was waiting for them there.

On an impulse she joined them, losing herself in the silent crowd of people, and boarded the train.

She was alone in the mass of transportees. She crouched by a window, engulfed on all sides by people, and looked through it as the train began to make its way out of the ruined ghetto.

She looked back all the way to Treblinka; something in her heart had come unfrozen and she felt forgotten pain clutch her. She thought of the painter and tasted tears. They burned as they trailed down her face, reminding her of things she had forgotten, reminding her of being alive.

She looked back, all the way to Treblinka, but nowhere were there butterflies.

What Happens in Vegas

Caroline M. Yoachim

Danielle

We can't afford this, not on top of my medical bills. The elevator that takes us up from the transit tube has brass railings and rosewood panels, and, when Alejandro and I step out into the lobby, the first thing I see is a fish tank that stretches across the entire back wall. There are giant chunks of coral in the bottom of the tank, and it's teeming with honest-to-god tropical fish. The water is emerald green. I can't even see the other side; the tank is too wide and there's too many fish. It's like we stepped into an advertising holo for one of the arcologies out west. Everything is clean and the air smells like plants.

"You'll like the fishes even better from the other side," the elevator attendant tells me. All this glamour and glitz is supposed to make me want their drug, their munin. I walk through the bio-scanner and the attendant hands me my output card. Alejandro is at the reception desk already. I try to hurry, and a sharp pain in my left leg makes me stumble. I'm getting worse. Pretty soon the muscle spasms will be so bad I won't be able to do needlework, and I'll lose my job. Alejandro is talking to the receptionist, focusing all his attention on her because I'm an embarrassment. I rotate my wedding band so the diamond faces up. It's loose on my finger, and the diamond falls back to the side as soon as I move my hand.

"Are you two here together?" The receptionist asks me, not Alejandro. Women get in for the same price, alone or with a man, but Alejandro would have to pay more than we have to get in here alone. Bringing me makes it cheaper, but still not cheap. He puts his hand over mine, but he won't look at me.

I nod.

"Documentation of good health?" she asks.

I almost laugh. We pass her our output cards from the bio-scanner, and she runs them through her reader and studies the results. My multiple sclerosis doesn't matter to *them*—it isn't an STD—but to Alejandro it's all I am. A walking disease. A symbol of frailty and death. The death of our dream to save up and move

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west for a better life. We traded most everything we had for interferon treatments, which work for most patients, but didn't work for me. Now we're stuck living underground like worms, and Alejandro will never be anything better than king of the worms, bossing around all the other worms as they dig their tunnels from one underground city to the next.

I don't believe the munin will help us, not really, but I'm a sucker for Alejandro's smile. The last few days have been good, like the way things were before I got sick. When Aleja is nice to me, I feel guilty for the time I've been spending with Matt. Just talking. But talking for hours and hours because he's willing to be close to me in a way that Alejandro isn't. Thank god Matt isn't working here tonight. I can't imagine what would happen if the two of them ended up in the same room.

"Thumbprint here, and you're cleared to go in."

She passes me the e-form on a gold-plated reader sheet. The header says VEGAS, all in capital letters, and below that is the slogan the club stole from its namesake city: "What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas". Except that here it's true, because the munin keeps everyone from forming memories. The drug inhibits long-term potentiation in the hippocampus—Matt told me all about it, and he used to be a surgeon, so he knows. Any memories you have when you first come in, you keep, but inside the club you can't hold anything in your head for more than seven seconds. No one will know what you do, not even you. Celebrities are calling munin the new cocaine, and Alejandro wants us to try it. I press my thumb onto the bottom right corner of the sheet.

"Ladies on the left, men on the right." The receptionist hands each of us a terrycloth robe. "Enjoy your stay."

Alejandro heads off to the men's locker room without saying anything. I want to scream at him that I'm here, that I'm doing what he wants, and the least he can do is not be such a jerk. Maybe it would have been better if Matt *had* been working tonight. No. I'm married and he's engaged. I need to stop meeting him, not look for ways to have more.

I limp down the hallway. It's lined with paintings from before the collapse—open-air cities stretching up into blue skies with puffy white clouds, an underwater scene with turtles and dolphins, three strawberries. Things I long for, but can never have.

There's a bar at the entrance to the locker room. The bartender has the latest issue of *Cosmo* on her reader sheet. The cover features Jennifer Stanton holding an adopted baby girl from some underground bunker in Africa. The baby's dress has hand-sewn beading and lace. I made that dress, and Stanton paid more than I make in six weeks to buy it. The bartender sets aside the reader sheet. I half-expect her to take my order, but there's only one drink here. I try to guess what everything is as she pours it in. The tiny round capsules at the bottom are time-release sedatives, to knock me out before the munin wears off. The white milky stuff—well, I'm not sure what that is. The munin is last of all, two bright-red drops with edges that swirl out like octopus tentacles.

"First time, hon?" the bartender asks. She's about the same age as my mother, and has the same hair. Fine blonde strands that hang limp around her face. Why does the bartender have to look like my mother? I couldn't even drink or smoke in front of her, how am I supposed to shoot the munin?

I nod and try to smile. The corners of my mouth twitch. I'm sure the bartender thinks I'm scared, but it's just the MS. Well, mostly the MS. I swirl the shot glass, and the shot goes from red-on-white to Pepto-Bismol pink. I sniff it, but it doesn't smell like anything. I raise the glass to my lips.

"You'll want to get the whole thing down in one gulp," the bartender says.

I take the shot. It tastes like whiskey and soap mixed with mayonnaise, and the mixture coats my throat. The sedative capsules are slimy and soft like chunks of snot. I swallow several more times, willing the vile mixture to remain in my stomach. The bartender passes me a glass of water, and I gulp it down. The water is flavored with artificial lemon, which helps clear the munin. "Thanks."

"Mu takes a little getting used to," she says, picking up her reader. "I give everybody a chaser the first time. The locker room's just around the back of the bar—put *everything* into a locker; you can't bring anything into the club except yourself and the robe."

The locker room has cots covering most of the floor space, and lockers along one wall. A bunch of women cluster by the door at the far end, all wearing jeans and white t-shirts. Staff. I head for one of them, but she waves me toward the lockers. "Can't let

you in for fifteen minutes, love, gotta wait for the mu to kick in. Go get yourself a locker."

I set my robe on a cot and palm one of the lockers. There's a loud clanking as the compartments shift behind the doors to bring up an empty one. I take off my sandals and dress and bra and put them in the locker. I unclasp the gold cross my mother gave me and put it into the little jewelry basket. God has no place in Vegas anyway. I look down at my wedding ring. Do I have to take it off? I don't want to, but if it falls off I'll never find it. I pull it off my finger and put it with the necklace. Last of all I put on my robe and slide off my panties.

There's a cockroach crawling along the base of the lockers. A brown one. I should tell one of the women working the door. I turn around and something slams behind me. The locker door. I still have my panties in my hand. I should put them in the locker. The locker is closed. Am I done here? I giggle. "Euphoria is a side effect of munin," I say, to no one in particular. I remember shooting the munin. I drank the tiny red octopus, and now it's eating my brain. I laugh some more.

A woman presses my hand into the locker door, and it opens. My things are inside. She takes away my panties and puts them in with the rest, then closes the door. "Not fast enough at the lockers, love. Good thing for you we're not crowded yet."

I'm holding hands with a woman who looks vaguely familiar. Her hand is warm. I'm not wearing anything under my robe. There are more women by the door. One of them pats me down, then waves me through.

"Welcome to Vegas," she says.

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Alejandro

There's a guy at the counter blocking the entrance to the locker room. He's stacking shot glasses into a pyramid and he finishes placing the last glass before he looks up at me. "You know the rules?"

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This is obvious bullshit, a guy bored out of his mind from mixing the same damned drink all night. He's messing with me just to show that he can. "Yeah, I know the rules."

He shakes his head. "Not good enough. You tell me the rules, I'll mix you your shot."

There isn't anybody else around. Danielle insisted we come early. She knows I'm embarrassed by how she looks, and she thinks if nobody sees her it won't bother me as much. But it bothers me. Her dress looks like it came from before the collapse, an Easter-Sunday dress, but black. Used to be she'd walk into a room and every man would want her. She used to know exactly what she wanted, wouldn't take no for an answer, and you could see it in the way she held herself, the way she moved. These days she doesn't even try. All she does is sit on the couch, trembling so bad she can barely sew. She doesn't go after what she wants; she doesn't seem to want anything. Whatever. She got me in here, and now I can have a little fun.

I decide to humor the guy at the counter, let him feel like a big man. I rattle off the rules, which basically boil down to don't bring anything in, and no violence. He fixes me my shot and sets it on the counter. I wait for him to go back to dicking around with his shot glasses, but he crosses his arms and waits for me to take the shot. It looks like a bloodshot eyeball, red on white. I toss it back.

The stuff tastes like shit smells, and it clings to the roof of my mouth and the back of my throat. "The amount I paid, you could at least make this shit taste decent. I work hard for that money, man. Worked my way up from running a digger to managing the entire Sandburg-to-Umberton tunnel project."

The guy at the counter shrugs and puts my empty shot glass into the sterilizer. He's got chasers back there, or at least water, but I'm not about to ask. I walk past the counter to the lockers, letting the spit build up in my mouth so I can swish it around and swallow out more of the goddamn taste.

I palm a locker and it pops open. It doesn't take long to throw all my stuff inside, so when I'm done I fish my PDA out of my pants pocket. The default image is my favorite picture of Danielle, which is the last thing I want to see right now. It's from a few weeks after we started dating. She's sitting in the cab of my digger, looking utterly ridiculous trying to work the main drill in a flowing blue skirt and strappy stiletto sandals. I can't see it in the picture, but I remember how she'd painted her toenails pastel blue to match the skirt. She had the cutest toes. I get stabs of guilt, seeing her like she used to be. I call up my picture of Katya. She's sitting naked on a bed with satin sheets, cupping her breasts in her

hands. She's all curves, and her skin is tan, almost like she's been out in the sun. Hot. Under the picture is a note. Vegas. Friday. *Meet you on the inside.* I put my PDA in the locker and pull on my robe. Damn thing is too long, like they expect me to be six feet tall or something. Whatever. I don't plan to wear it much.

Now what? There's only one other door, with a bunch of guys milling around it. I weave around some beds and head in that direction.

A guy gets up in my face. "Not yet."

Jerk. I slam my hand against the wall behind him. My palm stings, but it feels good. I feel strong, like I could push off from the wall and fly across the room. The guy in front of me is watching me, eyeing me like he knows I'm a threat. Good. Serves him right for...what? The guy laughs. He better not be laughing at me.

"Pat him down," the guy says. A couple other guys come over and make sure I don't have anything but the robe. I remember this from the instructional vids. Rules, regulations, pat-downs. When they finish I push past them and into the club. The lights are dim. My eyes adjust. In the vids, the whole place looked like the lobby. Liars. Do they think I'm so stupid I won't know the difference? I turn around to give them a piece of my mind. The door is closed. I open it, and the locker room is inside. Fucking hilarious. I laugh, and a guy inside the locker room points at something behind me.

The place is a shithole. The only good thing is the music, saxophones piped in through the speakers, playing something mellow and jazzy. Hardly anyone is in here. A couple bouncers are walking around in jeans and white T-shirts. There's a scrawny teenage boy sitting on the couch jerking off while a girl dances for him. Probably a hired girl. I've seen plenty of ads for them, girls that will come in with single guys, looking to make some cash and have a good time. The room should be filled with them, but there's only the one, dancing lewdly for a greasy-haired boy. Katya will be classier than that. I'm paying her, but she came to me, picked me out of the crowd when I was hanging out at the bar with my friends.

An old woman walks up to me. She says, "I have to pee. How do I get back to the locker room? I have to pee."

Her hair is gray and stringy, and her robe hangs open in the front. She has stretch marks. I shake my head. She's too old for

me to be interested. She squirms, but I don't care how excited she is. Where the hell is Katya?

I look around.

Danielle is standing by the fish tank wall. Figures. Even in a sex club she isn't having sex. She used to be so sexy. She sees me.

"Did you see the fish?" she asks.

"Who cares about the fish?" I wish she'd go away. I know she wants me to have sex with her, but I can't do it. She's so fragile, so sick. In the gap where her robe hangs open, I can see her ribs. I don't want to touch my own wife, even if I don't have to remember it later.

"Look at the fish," I tell her. She won't remember any of this anyway. "No sex. Just watch the damn fish."

Danielle starts crying. What is she so upset about? She's never happy, no matter how hard I work, no matter what I do. Well, it isn't my fault. I take her shoulders and turn her so she's facing the fish. The water in the tank is glowing with lights along the top and bottom. The water looked green from the lobby, but now it's turquoise. The color of the sheets in my picture of Katya. I wonder if she's here.

Damn, this place is a shithole, and it's almost empty.

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Katya

"Hey, Lawrence. How's the kids?" I ask as I walk through the bio-scanner.

"Julianne's got them until school starts. She's been dragging them to that crazy church of hers. Drilling into their heads that the collapse portends the coming of the Rapture and that their papa's a heathen." He holds out my bio-scan card and I let my fingers brush against his when I take it.

Lawrence reminds me of my dad, back when I was living at home, trying to fill the gaping hole my mother left behind. He wants the same things Dad did—family, love, a past that can never be recaptured. I give him my best sympathetic smile. I don't want him blabbing to Matt that I was here tonight, and he does look like he could use a little sympathy. "Oh, honey, that's terrible."

Lawrence grins. "Well, it's not so bad as all that. She bombards them with that crap, and then they turn around and complain to me

about having to sit through those boring church services. Still, you don't see me trying to poison the kids against her."

"Good for you, Lawrence." Roll over and do nothing while your ex walks all over you. Just like Dad. I'm tempted to tell him to stand up for himself, fight back against Julianne, but he won't want to hear it from me. "Way to take the high road," I add, moving on.

Behind the reception desk, the fish tank is on the blue side of turquoise. Alejandro paid me to show up at emerald green eight, but as long as he's inside, he won't know the difference. This isn't about him anyway. I hope he brought his wife like I told him.

"My client already inside, sugarplum?" Rebecca blushes when I use the nickname. We used to date, back before I started working the club. She was the one that told me about this place, got me all my leads on clients. Course, after a while it started to bother her that I was off with strangers all the time instead of home with her. She was a sweetheart, though; always got up early and made us waffles to eat in bed.

"Yeah," Rebecca says. "Came early, and with another woman. Three-way tonight?"

Rebecca is always trying to figure out what happens on the inside. Honestly, with all the mystery built up around it, you'd think people were doing some insane shit while they can't remember. The reality isn't nearly as interesting. The bouncers don't allow violence, and there are only so many ways to fuck. "Nah. He's just too cheap to pay the singles fee and too ugly to come in with me."

"I thought Matt didn't want you working here," Rebecca says. Loves her gossip, that girl.

"He doesn't. But if I wouldn't stop for you, why should I stop for him?"

She loves hearing that, and she sure is cute when she's happy. I'd stay and flirt, but there's people trickling into the lobby and lining up behind me. I pass Rebecca my bio-scan card. She puts it in the reader and gives me a good once-over.

150 "Shame you'll have to take off that little red dress to get in, you look amazing," she says. She has a thing for screwing with clothes on. I never did understand it. Damn stuff always seems to get in the way. "You want a robe?"

"Nah, I'm good with my own skin. I knew you'd appreciate the dress, though." I made the dress myself. The neckline is low

to show off the boobs Matt bought me for Christmas, and the sleeves are long and loose and lined with a thin layer of flexible pearlescent plastic. The fabric over the plastic is almost transparent, with ruby red swirls. The sleeves look like shimmering white wings with delicate red veins.

As I walk down the hall to the lockers, I pull a flask out of my purse and take a swig of soy creamer. I order my coffee with cream but I drink it black so I can save the creamer packs. I swallow most of the creamer, but hold a little in my cheek.

A couple of women are lounging on the beds by the lockers, waiting for their mu to kick in so they can head into the club. One of them is a redhead, natural, not wearing a robe. I wonder if she's the girl Ricki got to replace me. Prim-and-proper Ms. Wilson is working the bar tonight, though, and she won't tell me anything about the redhead, even if she knows.

"Any good sex tips in *Cosmo*?" I ask.

She doesn't answer. She mixes up my mu and sets it in front of me.

Everybody has to take mu to get into Vegas. What happens here stays here, and it only works if everybody scans clean and everybody shoots the shit. Even I shoot the mu nine times out of ten. But not today. Today I pour the mu into a pouch in the plastic-lined sleeve of my dress. Ms. Wilson is watching me, so I open my creamer-coated mouth to show her I swallowed. She gives me a disgusted look and goes back to her magazine. While I'm walking to the lockers, I seal up the sleeve. Straight mu is where the black money's really at, but I get a decent price selling unused shots. Mu cut with sedatives and birth control and God only knows what else is better than no mu at all.

I strip and lock up my things. All I really miss is the shoes. Four-inch heels go a long way toward making a girl's legs look nice, and the floor of the club gets pretty gross. I head to the bathroom at the back of the locker room and pee, since that's what I'd do if I was under. Then I help myself to some of the personal lube from the dispenser on the wall. One of the girls guarding the door is looking at me, so I smile at her, then pretend to notice the dispenser for the first time.

It's been long enough now that I can go in. I head for the door. They pat me down and wave me through. I scan the club for the redhead I saw by the lockers. She's not far from the door, making

out with a man who has to be seventy years old. The redhead is my clock. When her sedatives kick in, I have to go back to the locker room and pretend to sleep off my mu.

Alejandro is leaning against a wall, watching other people get off. Even in here he isn't getting any action. Probably thinks he's too good for everybody. But where's his wife? He sees me and comes over.

"Where's Danielle?" I ask. I can tell it isn't what he wants to hear, and for a moment I almost feel sorry for him. But he wants this, and our agreement has two parts: he pays me and he brings his wife.

"I brought her. She's somewhere."

Obviously he doesn't remember where. I wander around the club, avoiding the areas of the floor that look sticky. It's early, but the whole room stinks of sweat and sex. This is the downside of not shooting the mu: I'll remember all this in the morning.

I barely recognize Danielle. The picture on Matt's laptop is from when she was in college and he was in his last year of med school, years ago. She was more attractive back then, if you went for the pale willowy sort, but now she's skin and bones. Matt has me—that should be enough. I gave up working the club when he proposed. I trusted him. And then he started meeting with her. She isn't even pretty. She sits by the fish tank, trembling a little and watching the fish. I pull her to her feet.

"They aren't real," I tell her. "There haven't been fish like that for decades."

Roughing people up is discouraged, but the bouncers spend all their time watching the men, and take the mu like everybody else, so it's all about not triggering their trained responses. I drag Danielle over to Alejandro.

"I know you," she says. "You're Katya. Matt's fiancée."

"That's right, bitch." I stand next to Alejandro.

"Aleja? Do you know her?" She looks confused.

"Oh, he doesn't *know* me," I tell her, "but he will."

Alejandro doesn't move. He can't take his eyes off his wife. He says, "I don't want her to see this."

I press up against him, and he looks at me as though he's surprised. After a few seconds he forgets all about his wife, even though she's standing right there. He looks at me, and I look at Danielle. This is what you get, bitch, for stealing my fiancé. Matt

tried to hide it, but he's a piss-poor liar. Every time you met with him, I knew.

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Matt

The woman in front of me is standing so close her hair brushes against my chin when she moves her head. The elevator is packed, but not as bad as the subway was. My shirt is glued to my chest from sweat. The transit tunnels are running past capacity again, and all the money for expansion is going to the long-distance lines instead of the local. No one wants to spend money here, because everybody has this foolish dream that they'll get out someday.

The crowd jostles, and the woman in front of me leans into my chest. She mumbles an apology. Her left arm spasms, a characteristic symptom of PCND. Post-Collapse Neurodegenerative Disorder. Even decades after the collapse, no one knows the cause or the cure. Danielle has convinced herself that she has multiple sclerosis, that if she could come up with more cash she could buy herself another round of interferon and be cured, but odds are what she really has is PCND. Seven years of med school, and all I'm good for is diagnosing hopeless cases in the elevator on my way to work.

I hear echoes of a six-year-old girl, strapped to my surgical table, screaming.

Anything is better than those surgeries. Besides, I help people now. Bouncers keep the men from getting too aggressive. I'm paying off my debt. I lean forward and whisper in the woman's ear, "If the PCND causes you pain, there's a man named Blackjack on level two of SoJo that can help."

She's startled. She glances at me, wary, then nods her head.

"Tell him Matt sent you, and when he names his price, tell him I said it'd be half that." Blackjack is a good guy, brings in drugs that help people, but he's also a greedy SOB.

A few more minutes go by. Club Vegas is practically on the surface; only a few meters of rock and a thick lead roof separate us from the outside world. The elevator empties, and the woman I spoke to smiles at me before following the rest of the customers through the scanner.

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"Second shift started ten minutes ago, Matt," Lawrence says.

"Rochester got busted for stealing mu, so I'm a last-minute addition to the schedule." Late shift is midnight purple to sunrise red, and I avoid it whenever I can. The damn fake fish always look like they're bathed in blood in the morning.

"So Rochester was selling our shit black, huh? He have a private buyer, or did he go to Caged Birds like Jackie did?"

"Don't know and don't care," I say. I can't stand to think about the darker clubs, and Caged Birds is one of the worst. Girls—and a few boys, too—kept under mu around the clock. Customers can do anything short of killing the caged birds, and probably even that if the price is right.

"Katya's here," Lawrence says, changing the subject. "Tried to bat her eyelashes at me, like that'd stop me from telling you."

"Katya?" She'd told me she was staying at her dad's to celebrate her brother getting out of prison. Giving me some space tonight so I could watch the game with my boys and a bottle of whiskey. Even working, I might never have known she was here, if not for Lawrence. "Thanks, man. I owe you."

"Men gotta stick together," he says.

There's a line at check-in, so I don't get a chance to chat Rebecca up about why Katya came in tonight. I toss her my bio-scan card and head to the locker room. Zach's working the bar, lining up shots and watching carefully as each guy takes one.

"Work or play?" he asks me.

"Work. I got better things to do than come here on my time off." Some of the other guys at the bar turn to look at me like I'm crazy. As if doing shit they won't remember is the best thing on earth.

This isn't what munin is for; it's supposed to be for advanced neurosurgical procedures. So surgeons can get patient feedback while they rebuild damaged nerves. People need to feel pain so they don't accidentally damage themselves. Without pain, a man might leave his hand resting on the burner and scorch his flesh to the bone without knowing it. A six-year-old girl might step on a nail, and let it go all the way up through her foot, smiling the entire time. I gave the gift of pain. *I gave the gift of pain.* No matter how much I tell myself that the surgeries were helping those people, I can't wash away their tortured expressions. I can't erase the tears.

No amount of munin will rip away the memory of Tabitha staring up at me with wide eyes and begging me to stop.

"You all right?" Zach asks. He gets out a fresh shot glass and fills it halfway with water.

"Yeah. Just some personal stuff." Zach knows I used to be a surgeon, but I don't want to get into it tonight, not with customers around. He adds two drops of mu to my glass and hands it to me. I sip the shot. The customers don't know it, but the mu itself tastes pretty good, like almonds. It's the sedatives and all the other drugs they mix it with that taste so terrible.

There's already a couple sleepers in the locker room, people who got here in the middle of the afternoon. I put my stuff into a locker. The rules say nothing valuable, nothing sharp, nothing to make recordings or communicate with the outside. Same rules for the bouncers as for everybody else, except that we mostly keep our clothes.

I'll find out in a few minutes what Katya is up to. I won't remember, but I do have a system. If I want to dump her, after I find out, I'll put a nice deep scratch across my left forearm. I tap the locker door with my finger. Tap tap tap. Wait. I tapped three times, mu hasn't kicked in yet. Tap tap tap tap. Three times? Or was that before? Doesn't matter. The guys at the door will send me back if I'm not ready.

Johnny and PJ meet me by the door and pat me down. I know from training that they do this every time, but I don't remember. Once I'm in, I scan the room. The music is too loud, sleazy not-quite-jazz that sounds like the soundtrack to an amateur porn flick.

I don't have to do anything unless things get dangerous. See violence, stop violence. Training is all about ingraining routines into our heads. If I repeat to myself what I'm doing, I can remember long enough to act. I scan the room. There's a mix of orgies and loners and couples and voyeurs. Nothing that requires intervention. I look for Katya. Lawrence said she was here.

I see Danielle. She shouldn't be here; this isn't her kind of place. She's still wearing her robe, and she's sitting with her back against the fish tank, her arms wrapped around her legs. Long, graceful legs. Dancer's legs. She used to move like a ballerina, back before her PCND ate away the dendrites in her cerebellum and stole her grace. Or maybe she's right and it's MS degrading

her myelin sheaths. It hardly matters which. A skilled surgeon could install artificial nerves to simulate pain, but both PCND and drug-resistant strains of MS are beyond current technology. Not that Danielle could afford surgery anyway. She's here, sitting with her back against the fish tank.

She's trembling. The tremors are caused by her disease, and seeing how fragile she is makes me hard. I hate it, I hate that my body responds this way. I met her too late. She was dating Alejandro, and they seemed a good match. An old-fashioned hard-working boy and the beautiful Neo-Catholic girl next door. Wholesome. I might have loved her for her, back then. Now she's shaking and I'm getting off on her being sick. I used to give the gift of pain, and now pain triggers something in me, something twisted and broken that wasn't there before. Danielle is so delicate, so fragile, and she won't remember any of this.

Her fists are clenched. I go over to see what's making her so angry. I follow her gaze. Katya and Alejandro are having sex, missionary style, right there on the floor. I'm supposed to scan the room, but I can't. Katya told me she'd stopped working here. She promised. And now she's with—Alejandro? Danielle's husband. It doesn't make any sense.

Alejandro stares down at Katya, but Katya isn't looking at him. She's looking at Danielle. Why is Danielle here? Something is making her angry; her fists are clenched and her face is turning red. It triggers my training—she looks like she's going to attack someone. She's going to kick Katya. Danielle's so sick and weak that I'm tempted to let her have one good kick. It wouldn't hurt anybody. But I pull her away. If there's a fight, Danielle might get hurt. Danielle. Her body is pressed up against mine, shaking, fragile, and oh God do I want her.

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Danielle

Matt's holding me, but more important than that he *wants* to hold me. I'm not wearing anything under my robe. Alejandro is here somewhere, and I can't let him see me with Matt. I turn away, and the first thing I see is my husband. He's with Katya. Alejandro didn't want me here at all. He only brought me to get out of paying the singles fee. I think I knew it all along but couldn't admit it to myself. Katya is staring at me. I won't cry in front of her; I won't

give her that satisfaction. She watches me struggle to keep my emotions in check, and she leers at me. She did this. She's the reason we're here. My legs are tired and it hurts to move them, but I have enough strength in me for one good kick.

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Alejandro

Katya isn't looking at me. I turn my head to see what's so damn interesting, and she reaches up and cups my cheek with her hand. Her fingers are warm, and her skin is slick with sweat. She turns her head to look at something. Her hand is pressed against my cheek, like she doesn't want me to look but I turn my head and there's Danielle. Katya's watching Danielle. She's tricked me into coming here, so she can watch my wife. Danielle is angry. Something in the club has brought out her fire, and she's the girl I married again. Strong. Beautiful. I feel a hand against my cheek, and I turn to see who it is.

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Katya

Alejandro is on top of me, pumping and sweating. Every few minutes I have to turn his head to keep him focused. He hates that I'm not giving him my full attention. Danielle keeps trying to kick me. Gutsy. I didn't think she had it in her to fight back. Her trying to kick me doesn't matter. What bothers me is the moment of hesitation, the moment where Matt fights against his training. He doesn't want to protect me. He's not looking out for me. I was silly to think he would. But I don't need him. I don't need the money he saved up cutting children open and watching them writhe around in pain. I can make my own money. I can take care of myself.

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Matt

It doesn't make sense. Katya and Alejandro. Unless Katya brought him here to mess with me. That has to be it. I drag my fingernail across my forearm, leaving a long pink scratch. Danielle is here, and angry. I wonder if I can get away with letting her kick Katya, but I decide I'd better not, and I pull her away. Katya frowns. There's something off about her reactions. She's...something.

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Katya. Having sex with Alejandro, while Danielle watches. It's too complicated. I try to hold everything in my mind, but the mu clouds it. Then suddenly it clicks. Katya didn't take mu tonight. I have to hold that in my mind. Katya is skipping the mu. Katya is skipping the mu.

- - -

Danielle

The sedatives kick in, but I can't leave. I have to stay awake so I can remember what Katya has done. Have to stay awake. Have to stay awake. Why do I have to stay awake?

- - -

Alejandro

Right in the middle of sex I start dozing off, that's how bad Katya is. Well, forget this. She's all tease, and she took her money up front. Never again. I stand up. Katya's down on the floor, and she gives me a sexy smile. If I wasn't drugged, I'd hit her again. We must have had some damn good sex.

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Katya

Matt has me figured out. He knows I'm not on mu, and since the bouncers don't do the sedatives, he might remember. They're trained to hold something in their mind, if they have to, by tuning out all the distractions. Alejandro and Danielle came so early that they're halfway asleep, but my redheaded clock is still going strong, so there's time to deal with Matt. I sidle up next to him and lightly kiss his neck, his cheek. I brush my lips against his. No response whatsoever. His lips move as he repeats a single phrase over and over. It's risky, but I know what I need to do, and I need to do it fast, before they stop letting people into the club. I squirm around like I have to pee, and make a beeline for the locker room.

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Matt

Katya is skipping the mu. Things are still happening in the club, but I tune them out. Katya is skipping the mu. There are other bouncers; they'll take care of it. Katya is skipping the mu. Katya is—she's coming toward me. She's skipping the mu. I expect

her to try kissing me again, as a distraction, and she does—she's skipping the mu—but she also holds my nose, and when I gasp for breath she spits something foul-tasting into my mouth. She's got one hand pinching my nose and her mouth is pressed onto mine to keep me from spitting or yelling. I swallow without meaning to, and she lets me breathe. It's mu. Somehow Katya got a second shot of mu. She's done something tonight she doesn't want me to remember, and with the sedatives I won't. Katya spits on the floor. She's not supposed to do that, but what's a little spit on a sticky floor? Katya isn't supposed to be here at all, she promised she'd stop. She walks away, and I feel like I've forgotten something. There's a scratch on my left forearm. Whatever she did, it's bad.

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Danielle

Waking up, I feel better than I've felt in years. My bed is a fluffy cloud, and the sheets smell like lavender. I stand up, and it's like I'm watching my body from the outside. I'm trembling, but I don't care. All the other women are sleeping, trapped in a fairy tale without a prince to kiss them. I take a shower and jets of hot water spray out from the gold-plated shower head. My skin turns the prettiest shade of pink. Like the carnations I see in pictures sometimes. No. Like real carnations! I am a flower, floating on the shower steam.

Matt told me about this. People get euphoria at both ends of a munin trip—right after they shoot the shot, and again when the drug clears out. He said munin targets the hippocampus, but also affects the limbic system. Hippo-campus. I giggle. College for hippos. I can't stop laughing. I'm so happy. Despite what Matt says, I think the real reason I feel so good is that my body had twelve solid hours without pain. And I finally got laid. I take a handful of soap and lather it over my skin. White foam on pink, an upside-down shot of munin.

Alejandro is happy too. He meets me in the lobby and even holds my hand for the elevator ride down to the transit tunnels. He talks about coming back, and I hope it's soon. I see the appeal now, the healing power of the munin.

We go again three months later, and a third time a month after that. We want to go more often, but we can't afford it.

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By our fourth visit, Rebecca recognizes us. She smiles at me when we pass her our bio-scan cards. She looks sad. I wonder if she envies us, if she secretly wishes she was on our side of the counter. My hands are shaking so badly today that it's hard to line up my thumb with the confirmation box on the e-form. I had to quit my job, and it won't be much longer before I can't walk.

All I have to look forward to is the few hours of pain-free bliss I get from the mu. I don't remember, but my body knows. Every time I wake up off the mu, I feel refreshed, energetic, happy. Alejandro is happy too. It's the only time he talks to me now, going into the club and coming back out. The rest of the time he's angry, or working, or drinking with his buddies at one of the bars near his construction site. He resents having to bring me here. It hurts to think about it, but I know it must be true. I'm not the gorgeous trophy wife he wanted, not the girl I was when he married me. If it wasn't so expensive for him to come alone, I think maybe he would.

We part ways, each going to our own locker room. I shoot the mu no problem now, no need for a chaser, and I change into my robe. I reach down to take off my wedding ring, but it's gone. We had to sell it to pay for the mu. I shut the locker. A group of women come in, talking excitedly about how they are going to swap husbands tonight, and how they always have the wildest sex when they know they won't remember.

A girl comes over from the doorway and herds me out into the club. I wonder if I've forgotten to go in before. I don't see Alejandro. The club is dirty and loud, and the floor is sticky. The fish tank is a pretty blue-purple color. I stare at the fish for a while. One of them is dead. It floats upside down, caught on the underside of an outcropping of coral. Poor dead fish. My leg spasms, and the motion is followed by a wave of pain. I thought the mu wiped away the pain, but I can still feel pain. I turn and sit with my back to the fish tank wall.

I don't see Alejandro. I see Matt. He's working. He comes over and sees me. "Are you okay? You should stop coming. I don't think the mu is good for you."

"You have to go. Alejandro will see us together."

"He won't remember."

"You have to go." I feel panicked, but I don't remember why. Matt helps me to my feet. I don't remember sitting down. Oh god,

did I have sex with Matt? What would Alejandro think? No, I'm still wearing my robe. Matt is holding my arm. He sees something in the middle of the room. Alejandro is there, but he isn't alone. He's with Matt's ex. With Katya. Alejandro comes here to have sex with Katya. They're both naked, and when she sees me she straddles him and lowers herself onto him.

"This is where all your money goes," she says. "He pays me to do this." Katya's legs are in a wider split than I could do even before I got sick. She's having sex with my husband. Staring at me. "If you weren't so stupid, you'd realize that he never has sex with you. Do you ever wake up sore? Sticky?"

Katya laughs. Sits over Alejandro's naked body and laughs. I feel a hand on my shoulder. It slides under my robe, and the soft fabric falls down and puddles around my feet. The hand belongs to Matt. He's working tonight. He comes up next to me and we watch his ex-fiancée and my husband. Actions without consequences. Matt rubs his hand down my back. I'm naked, standing next to Matt. Alejandro, my Aleja, is with another woman. I have to remember this, I have to. I try to burn the image into my brain, but I know it will never make it into long-term storage. Is it like this every time?

There's a hand pressed into the small of my back. I turn around. It's Matt. He's one of the bouncers tonight. He's not supposed to spend time with the customers. Alejandro is here somewhere, and I don't want him to see me with Matt. The mu has been good for us, and I want our marriage to work.

"He won't remember," Matt says. His hand is on my chest, above the breast but just below the collar bone.

I want him. I want him so badly.

"You won't remember," Matt says.

That's the worst thing. I want to remember this torture of wanting but not having. I want to remember the pain, so that I can leave this place and never come back. Matt tries to kiss me, but I pull away. We can't. I turn my back on him.

Katya is with my husband. Having sex.

I have to remember.

Hateful

Lydia Ondrusek

She sat straight up in bed when she realized it, when the bald man at the dinner party in her dream, the one who looked like Patrick Stewart, explained it to her. He had been apologetic, and she knew, looking into his kind blue eyes, that he was telling the truth. *Nobody you hate dies.* The shock woke her completely.

She sat as still as she could, almost vibrating with the knowledge of her power. But what a stupid and useless thing it was, she thought. Her husband, her children—doomed. Her elderly parents? More cannon fodder. Her friends? The same. All loved, all cherished, all of them teetering on the precipice. Her fault.

She lowered herself with great care onto the pillow so as not to wake her husband, whose placid snores had been the background music to her revelation. Pulled the Depression-era quilt up over her, smoothing and folding the edge with little pats, just so. Found, when she'd finished, that the right thing to do with her hands seemed to be to cross them on her breast. She stared up into the night, listening.

In the morning, all the usual things happened. Sun still twinkled on the floor of the kitchen. The automatic coffee pot still faithfully ground sufficient beans for eight cups, and filled the pot for her. Her husband, who vanished like a genie every morning while it was dark, still left fresh warm oatmeal covered on the stove.

She did her daily dance; offered oatmeal to the son leaving for work (who ran out with a car-mug of coffee, as usual); fed it to the senior daughter (who complained about calories); and prepared an exuberant little bowl of porridge for her surprise kindergartener—drowning it in maple syrup and adding a lump of real butter, then a crown of vanilla-flavored coffee-creamers that ran down the heaped sides like lava. All the same as usual, all of it. Today, though, in the light of her new knowledge, she greeted each of their responses with her usual smile and a mental *I hate you*. *I hate all of you*.

They didn't seem to notice.

She drove to the hospital by her usual route, amazed at the changing light, the nip in the air. It shouldn't have surprised her,

as school had been in for three weeks, but it did. She had been operating in a bubble, running like a hamster in a clear plastic ball. *No matter how close you get, she thought, no matter how hard you run, you're not going to get where you want to go. You're not allowed. Take what you have while you have it.* She parked in full sun.

Kit was waiting in a wheelchair. "I want to go for a walk. I want to go outside."

"Good morning to you too. The traffic was fine, thanks. Oh, and I hate you."

"Not nearly as much as I hate you. You're late."

She stopped by the nurse's station to make sure Kit hadn't gotten himself into the chair on his own—he'd done it before, pushing his agenda against the rules. It was probably why he was still alive.

This time he was in the clear; going out had been okayed. He had a hoodie on over his pajamas, hood up, and the big afghan tucked well around him. She thought, looking at his face, all that showed, that it might have been her in the chair. For being fraternal twins, they were very much alike. *Just one male and one female. One dying, and one not. Not yet. Probably.* Nobody had brain-scanned her, who knew. She caught sight of her face in a cabinet glass, pushing Kit past. *I hate you.*

Just in case.

Kit wanted to tell her about his dreams, lately. He couldn't hold a book up and the audio books she downloaded for him got on his nerves. He complained that the meds he was getting scrambled what was left of his brain. But they gave him grand wild Technicolor dreams. The previous night's had involved bull-fighters and snow and people speaking Russian leading a parade of live chairs. When he finished, he demanded to know what she'd dreamed the night before.

"Nothing."

"Oh, don't give me that. You just dreamed something that pales in comparison. Something inutterably boring."

So she told him about the dinner-party dream ('The black dress, but with a different necklace. I need to find a necklace like that, now that I think about it.') and about the Captain Picard-like man who had drawn her over, urgently, away from the others, to tell her that nobody she hated died. "It wasn't a dream like yours, but it felt real. It felt true."

"That why you told me you hated me when you came in? I thought you were just smacking me for being jerky."

"Yeah, it was." She looked at the window instead of looking at him, back in the bed now, spent from the exertion of being rolled around the hospital parking lot. "That was why."

"B?" His nickname for her, since she was born second. "B, it is true, nobody you hate dies. But not because of some magical garbage."

"What do you mean?"

"B, nobody *you* hate dies because *you* don't hate anybody." He smiled his tiny smile at her. "Not in as long as I can remember, anyway. Can you think of anybody you hate? Really?"

She couldn't. She had to admit it.

"I've hated people. I've hated lots of people, even ones I didn't know. I never understood why you didn't, but hey, maybe that was my big talent. I don't hate anybody now, though. I don't have time for it." Kit played with his covers, folded the same as she had her quilt the night before. He made a little hand motion she knew, and she pulled the afghan she'd put at the bed's foot up for him, so he could feel its weight and warmth. Kit closed his eyes. She wondered if he was going to sleep. He did that sometimes, just slid suddenly away. When he spoke again, he did it without opening his eyes, as though the lids were too heavy.

"And the other reason nobody you hate dies is, if you hate somebody, they're right there with you all the time. It's like loving somebody, but sick. You remember everything about them, everything they say and how they say it, keep living those minutes over and over again. Why waste that on somebody you hate? I don't have enough minutes. Nobody has enough minutes...." His lashes fluttered, settled, and he sighed. "You already knew that...you should have been the older one...."

He went silent, and she listened so hard, clenching her fists—she got up, and bent over him, watching and listening, till she knew for sure he was just sleeping. She touched the hand outside the covers with a butterfly finger, like she used to touch her babies while they slept. Breathed in over his sueded head, smelling hospital soap; remembered the expensive scent he'd loved till the day it made him throw up. He'd sent it home with her for the oldest. "For dates. It's *really* good for dates. Tell him."

"I love you. Sleep well," she whispered. She picked up her things, not looking back at the still figure in the bed, and asked the nurses to let Kit know she'd call later.

He was sleeping again when she called, though. The nurse said he'd managed a little dinner. Not a lot, but some. She left a message that she'd see him in the morning.

She made sure to tell each child she loved them that night. It provoked responses ranging from the kindergartener's "You're the best mommy in the world and I love you too! Better than Widget!" (his cat) to the teen's cringing "Yeah, okay, I love you too, all right?" to the oldest one's hard silent hug. She caught a wisp of Kit's old cologne on him, and they hung onto each other longer than usual.

When her husband went off to bed at his usual early hour, she went with him. He was surprised. "Tired, baby?"

"No."

"Oh." His eyes widened. "Good!"

She was back at the dinner party in her dream, and as she stood at a mirror in the foyer of the strange house, looking at the blue-glass necklace, she saw a familiar face behind her. Kit, smiling. Wearing his tux; looking like James Bond, his hair elegant, slightly over-long. Smelling like she remembered.

A firm hand on her arm, the voice from the night before in her ear. *Nobody you love dies*. She turned to tell Kit, "This is him, this is the guy," but he was gone, and the Captain Picard guy was gone, and the phone was ringing.



Generation Gap

Arthur Wang

Memoir: Murray Street

Tara Deal

An abandoned window watches
under an eyebrow arch
lined in turquoise

and it's crushed, just a little, in the middle, the result
of a rock to scare the pigeons
or the thieves

and now the wind whistles
through the black hole

and someone below is
disturbed or so
it seems

while wrinkles spread like cracks
through the gray glass that hasn't lost
its reflection, not quite
collapsing,

while looking out

at me, the only witness, and past
the fire escape, trembling.

soft and bright

Teresa Houle

two eyes

a nose

bean-filled feet, with no toes

lost in flight—forgotten

lodged and smiling

behind the refrigerator

on the hot coils

caught alight

soft and bright

Inner Fabric, Wall-to-Wall

Richard Spuler

This isn't what you think.
Oh sure, I know: it *looks*
like corridors of wall-to-wall
tapestry, a chiaroscuro maze,
a labyrinth, if you will
of meaningful (and less meaningful)
meanderings, the texture often
thick and scarred, at times
suggestively barren, as if to say:
Should there have been a door here?
A window? An exit of some sort?
If only we knew whence the light.
But there's so little as to forget
the question ever meant something.

I should have pulled a string
to mark my way, but fearing
I would come unraveled, I refrained.

Maisy's Many Souls

Matthew Sanborn Smith

"Drew Carey is a son of a bitch!" The speaker crackled from behind the glass door. Must have been culled from a dead fast-food joint. "A pretender to the throne!"

Antonio started recording and knocked. He and Desmond stood huddled together on the small deck outside of Maisy's side door. The deck fit a chaise lounge with fraying nylon straps, one ashy hibachi, and two grown men. In the reflection of the green opaqued door, Antonio saw Desmond behind him swing his arm out, thumb his little gold capture. Into his pocket it went, along with his hand. He didn't let it go much. Today he'd started swinging it like a sort of photographic cesta. Some other guys might have broken his nose after the fiftieth time he did that.

"What do you want?" came the speaker voice.

They looked at one another. "Jesus, was that her?" Antonio asked.

"I thought it was her computer," Desmond said.

"I'm looking for Maisy," Antonio shouted. "I've got something she might be interested in here." He had four small circuit boards, fanned like a poker hand. He held them up to the door.

"Who sent you?" the voice asked.

"I don't know his name. He said she pays decent money for these. Maybe I got the wrong house, I don't know." He made to push past Desmond and down the steps. The glass door opened.

"Hey, you don't go nowhere!" the woman at the door said with a pop and a crackle. Antonio picked out her words from inference. Voice by way of broken drive-thru speaker. The distortion, the scratchiness, and intermittent cut-outs, it all came together in that bulging bullfrog throat of hers. "This is the place."

Her pocked face looked rough enough, blonde-white wavy hair which hadn't been washed in a while, a wide nose, and splotchy red rosacea. Maroon lips ripped across her skin. But the voice box topped it, like a python still working down the rabbit it had swallowed.

She stood sideways against the open door; Antonio took that as an invite. Even after his eye-filters adjusted him to the light, the place seemed dark, and it smelled like a funeral home full of smokers. The thick table, escaped from an old movie diner, squatted in the middle of the kitchen. Red top with thick chrome sides and four chrome legs which met in a ring, then splayed out to the floor. White linen curtains hung above the sink in layers, browning along the edges.

Desmond followed him in, his big eyes darting around the place. An astroturf welcome-mat near the gas stove almost covered a big chunk of bare concrete where the red-and-white linoleum had been torn away. One red diamond hooked the air, curling away from the mat. An antique wooden cabinet AV sat in the living room and could be viewed from the kitchen. It played a 2D game show from the last century. She kept the house cleanish, what he could see of it. Jars lined long shelves on all the walls, filled with a hazy liquid, the source of the funeral parlor smell, he realized. Something sat in each of those jars, hard to tell what. Each shone with the curving light of the AV's game as it played out; a woman in a sequined gown showed an aerosol can to an old man in a grey suit and a young fat man in a Kiss-Me-Quick T-shirt.

Once the door closed behind them, the old woman held out her hand. Antonio placed the circuit boards in the withered claw. She studied them in the dim light, and touched one to her tongue like kids used to do with batteries when Antonio and his pals ran amok in the old neighborhood. She glanced at him, like she'd caught him in a lie. He blew it off; he knew for a fact he'd brought the real thing. The lady couldn't tell jack; she was an old nutbag.

Desmond's hand shot out.

"What the hell are you doing?" the old lady shouted. She scooted back against the door in her ratty bedroom slippers and her hand scrambled for the handle.

"It's cool! It's cool!" Antonio said, with his hands shaking toward her. "He's just an artist!"

"You two get the hell out of my house right now! I'm gonna call the cops!" Spit flew from her lips and caught on the tiny hairs sprouting from her chin.

"We don't need no cops! Goddamnit, Desmond! Keep that fucking thing in your pocket!"

"He's recording!" the woman said. "Get outta my house!"

"He's not recording! He is not recording. He's gonna show you."

Desmond eased the device from his pocket. His thumb twitched on its tiny button as he spoke. Antonio wanted to strangle him.

"It's a capture, Ma'am," Desmond said. "I use it to make my collages."

She shook until she almost came apart. "Don't you point that thing at me! You put it away and get out!"

"All right, all right." Desmond held his hands up as if she had a weapon trained on him. Then he eased the capture into his coat pocket, thumb twitching all the way. Antonio could feel the vein in his head throb.

"Why don't you wait outside?" he said to Desmond. It wasn't a request.

Maisy opened the door for him and kept it between Desmond's body and her own. Her face was frozen with fear and anger, like he'd killed her husband.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am," he said on his way out. "I didn't mean no harm."

The old lady moved the door away from her a little once Desmond had stepped outside. "You too," she said to Antonio.

"I'm not recording anything."

"You're with him." She shook her head in the direction of out. Antonio approached the door, hand out for the circuit boards. She pulled his property close to her chest.

"You gonna pay for those, then?" he asked.

"I don't know if they're real!"

"Then give them back. Or maybe I need to call the cops."

Her eyes got wide. "They'd arrest you too."

"I've done time. I'll do it again before I let an old bitch like you walk all over me."

Her face collapsed. The brows wrinkled down, the lips puckered, going from open fear to angry scrutiny. She closed the door, leaving Antonio on the inside. From a drawer beneath the counter, she pulled out a machine that reminded him of an old-fashioned credit-card reader, but very high tech. She placed one of the circuit boards on the machine.

From the device came an old man's voice, much more lifelike than Maisy's. "Hello?"

"Do you like *The Price is Right*?" Maisy asked.

"What? Who is this? Where am I?"

The old woman got louder. "Do you like *The Price is Right*?" Her very-red face grew redder.

"It's okay, I guess. Haven't seen it in—" Maisy cut him short, pulling the green board from the reader. Her knobby hands snapped the board in half.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Antonio shouted. He ran around the edge of the kitchen table but stopped short when her hand warded him off. Maisy moved like a dealer. She reached for an old ceramic cookie jar which stood at the beginning of one row of the glass preserve jars. Now he stood closer, he could see that each of those little jars, clipped and pink ringed, held a circuit board.

In formaldehyde.

The old loon rested the cookie jar on the table and pulled out a wad of cash, peeling off hundred-Euro notes without a care and tossing them on the table in front of him. Where did she get that kind of money?

She put the other three circuit boards on the reader one at a time. Asked each of them the same thing: "Do you like *The Price is Right*?" It sounded like a nonsensical children's rhyme and none of the other circuit boards, two women and a man, could even understand the question. She didn't break any of those, only threw more bills down after checking each and placing the boards on the table.

Maisy smiled like Christmas morning. Antonio had pocketed the money after each test. He figured her mood good enough now that he could risk a question.

"What's that mean?" he asked. "Do you like the price is right?"

She laughed staccato white noise and wiggled one of the boards in his face. "You'd better pray to God you never wind up on one of these," she said. "Pray to God I never get my hands on you."

"Whyzat?" he asked with half a smile on his face. Her eyes opened wide until the yellows surrounded the pupils and he thought they might pop from her skull. Goosebumps raised, tingling across his neck and back. He'd entered a bad dream. His muscles shifted to pull away, but not so much she might notice. Any second a foaming freak would burst from that crooked-toothed and hyper-red face.

"Heretics," she said, shaking the board in her hand. She waved a bent magic-wand finger up and down the lengths of those shelves, the rows of glass jars arrayed in her kitchen and AV room. Once more she said, "Heretics." She circled her finger toward the ceiling, indicating more rows on the upper floors, and Antonio's throat grew dry. Far more here than he could have imagined. That bony finger, wrapped in translucent skin, a rainbow on old flesh, white at the knuckles, smoker's yellow along the inner edge, brown spotted and purple blotched, that knotted little finger pointed at him. Her psychotic smile.

"Heretics," she repeated.

She kept her finger in his face and placed the board on the reader once more. Antonio felt cold sweat drip from his left armpit to his love handle.

"Do you like *The Price is Right*?" she asked once more.

The woman's voice trembled on the edge of sobs: "I don't know what you're asking me!" Antonio felt a chill.

Maisy twisted a little knob on the reader. The woman's voice turned into a scream.

Antonio's vision blurred for a pummeling heartbeat, hairs across his body raised like he'd passed through an electrical field. What in the hell was happening to that woman? "All right, that's enough!" he yelled. He swatted the circuit board off the reader with a backhand. The scream cut off and the board clattered against the door.

Maisy bleated static and clawed his face. Her sharp nails dug the skin off of his cheek and nose. She struck again, tore him again. Antonio stepped back, stumbled on a chrome-and-vinyl kitchen chair and fell back against the stove. She clung to him and fought on. He fished the gun from his holster and forced it into her face, ripping through her over-ripe skin.

He pushed her away with the weapon.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, blood dripping down her face like tears. "Are you going to rape me?"

"Christ, no!" Antonio said. "Jesus, are you kidding me?" Keeping the weapon trained on her, he pulled his wallet from his coat and let it fall open to show his identification. "I'm with Humanity International. I'm placing you under civil arrest for human rights violations."

Maisy stared at his ID for a second; he wondered if she could even make out the words on it. Then she scampered for the door. He ran to catch her before she got out. Part of him burned with shame, not that she didn't deserve to go down hard, but because of what other people would think. He could see it about to happen through the eyes of an outsider. Another harsh light on the human condition, and he'd demonstrate its ugly side. She had the door open when he tackled her. He heard the snap he expected but he also felt something burst inside of her.

Shit.

Maisy let out a sharp gasp, but then, instead of screams, low crackling moans came out of her. On the deck Desmond stared like a dummy, the capture in his hand, his thumb frozen.

"She's hurt," Antonio said.

"You want me to call an ambulance?" Desmond asked.

"I'm doing it now. And cops too." Antonio climbed off the sobbing woman. She lay still on the deck, nothing more than a shabby, broken toy exposed to the sun. He kept one hand wrapped around her tiny wrist.

"Do you really have to hold her like that?" Desmond asked.

"Yeah." Antonio watched the road for the emergency vehicles.

Desmond's thumb twitched again.

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"I'm sorry," Desmond said as they drove home from the police station. The streets hummed electric with the rush-hour press. Four city buses, powder-blue and white, boxed them in, stretching higher than Antonio could see from his little two-seater. Antonio rubbed his face where an EMT had covered his wounds with surgical putty. It itched now. A group of kids bounced in front of them on carbon-fiber running blades, one so close she scraped the bumper.

"Get the hell outta the road!" Antonio screamed. Then to Desmond, "Sorry for what?" Even though he knew.

"I'm sorry I messed you up in the old lady's house. I didn't know she was going to freak like that."

"Yeah, well, don't sweat it. I swear to God I never seen anything like that in my whole life. She was running a frickin' torture chamber!" It felt like something sprang from his stomach as he said it, whatever had twisted his gut all this time. Maisy seemed

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to hang right behind him, ready to pounce again. He looked over his shoulder for a sign of the frail old creature.

"What kind of shape is the old lady in, anyhow?" Desmond asked.

"That's just like you, you know that?"

"What's just like me?"

"It's like you're trying to distract me from something you did by focusing on something I did."

"I wasn't trying to do that at all. You said it was no big deal."

"What I said was don't sweat it."

"So what does that mean? It is a big deal?"

"I don't wanna get into this right now, okay? It's this goddamned lawsuit and that dungeon today."

"You'll be fine, Tone. You've been sued before for a bust."

"Yeah, but not by anyone who deserved to be hurt so much. They questioned me, you know, on why I used excessive force when you were right outside the door."

"I'm not even with HI."

"I told 'em, and then they asked what the hell you were doing there in the first place."

"You told them about the—"

"Yeah. None of their goddamned business anyway."

Antonio got into the right lane and they glimpsed the transitioning city. Dusk came down fast as the sun hid behind the skyline. Some street vendors packed up and the neon and LED signs came into their own. The skyscrapers shed their staunch day jobs and began to glow in soft indigos and oranges, straight up to the clouds. Antonio even now, hours after, could feel the thrum of his pulse shaking his entire body. It could not be that strong.

"What's going to happen to those people the police confiscated?" Desmond asked.

"The sims? They'll put them down."

"They're going to kill them?"

"It's not killing, it's erasing."

"You're talking about ending those people's lives, the people on those circuit boards. I thought you were all about fighting for their rights."

"We're ending their suffering. They're trapped on those boards with no control over their own destiny, subject to torture

by hags like Maisy. Even if there weren't people like her, what kind of life is that, on a circuit board?"

"Well, do you ask what they want?"

"No, we don't ask. We don't ask a dog at the pound if it wants to die."

"I think people should be given the right to live out their lives. Nobody wants to be born, ask my twelve-year-old when she's in a bad mood. But we are born and they are created and we're all here now. What right do we have killing them?"

"Right? You don't talk to me about rights, okay? This is what I do with my life."

"You know the rights as they're written in your books, I'll grant you that. But I've got to wonder, are you really thinking about rights anymore? Or are you thinking about regulations?"

"Why don't you just.... Just do your pictures?"

"They're not pictures."

"Your collages then. Do your collages."

"I will."

Antonio turned into the parking garage at the base of their building, found his spot. He killed the motor but neither of them got out. They sat and stared at the grey concrete and the arc-white light that shone across its speckled surface. A stenciled black '57' stared back at them. Antonio always thought of ketchup.

"I think we should merge tonight," Desmond said.

Antonio took a long breath to calm himself before he spoke. "Why tonight?"

"I can feel things getting out of sync again." He put his hand on Antonio's knee, far lighter than he might have for such a large man. Antonio always crumbled. "I think it could relieve some tension. You know, other than the...usual way."

Antonio laughed a little and Desmond smiled once he did. Desmond knew how to play him.

"Working your voodoo shit on me again. Awright, how about in addition to the usual way?"

Now Desmond laughed a little and took Antonio's hand. "All right."

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They lay on wet sheets, legs cocked, trying to cool down and breathe deep in the thick air of Antonio's bedroom.

"You always fuck like it's a fight," Desmond said. "I think you take out all your anger on me."

Antonio said nothing, wondered if Desmond could see his smile in a room lit by a single shard of billboard light on the far wall. Desmond nailed it, but Antonio would be damned if he'd ever come out and say it. Antonio couldn't win arguments so much. Desmond always had an answer. In the bedroom Antonio could win. He could be rough and angry, thrusting hard to hurt the man who pissed him off so many times during the week, always holier than he. Antonio's head needed the sex sometimes more than his body did.

"You ready?" Desmond asked as his hand grabbed Antonio's thigh. It startled him awake. He hadn't thought he could doze off so quickly. Hadn't thought he'd be able to keep Maisey's horror house out of his mind long enough to sleep. Now she perched in his head once more.

"Huh? Yeah, awright."

Desmond stroked Antonio's chest hair. "Could I be on your side?" he asked. "I want to be on the left."

"This is my side."

"Please." Desmond said it with a kiss on the cheek so gentle Antonio would have done anything for him.

"Awright." Antonio threw himself down on the right. His side was soaked with sweat anyway; Des could keep it.

They lay together on Antonio's old foam mattress, covered with cologne to try and mask the stink of years. Desmond turned on the device that lay flat beneath their pillows. It projected a red field about two feet above itself. They approached it from opposite sides and moved their heads into the field. Meeting in the middle, their heads knocked where the forehead flows into the temple. Then they pushed against each other and kept going. Antonio felt his head being absorbed into Desmond's.

There came a point when he felt he might be on both sides of the bed at the same time. Connection. They got comfortable then, against the pillows, their skulls and brains conjoined. Antonio had no vision in his left eye. His right eye saw Desmond's chubby cheek, millimeters away, and the red glow of the field beyond it. Their jaws had fused; their mouths made one very long crooked line. For a moment, Antonio felt the breath from Desmond's nostrils on

his upper lip, but the sensation faded as the distinctions between them muddled and for a little while they became one person.

One person with memories of two real lives and a third synthesized one as charges fired between neurons that had never before been neighbors. In this space, they thought nonhuman thoughts and felt nonhuman memories, where the curve of a red wagon wheel merged with the throat-clearing of an ancient Haitian great-great-grandfather and the smell of hot-dog water. Pieces of sensation came together out of the synaptic zigzag of their formerly discrete minds. But it all felt right.

Outside of the nebulous headspace there sparked shared human thoughts. Together they felt the fatigue of fighting for the right cause without feeling they made a difference. They felt a breakthrough coming on with their art, experimenting with things they'd never tried before; their work felt more organic, more real. They reached down to access things which had never before seen human light. They could almost touch the spirits, souls glowing circuit-board green. World-anxiety flared but found itself snuffed in a thick emotional womb. Understanding. Acceptance. Peace.

They separated sometime later, so they could turn in their sleep. Separation meant a loss single brains couldn't explain. Grand thoughts slipped away like mercury through human fingers. In half-sleep Antonio felt Desmond's weight lift from the mattress. The thought melted away as he fell back into forgettable dreams.

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He got up hours later to piss. The house still smelled of the fish they'd fried up last night. Desmond moved quickly in the living room, his back to him.

"What are you doing?" Antonio called from the bathroom. He made the clear blue water a foamy green.

"Working," Desmond answered. He sat hunched on the ottoman, with only the balls of his feet on the floor, as if he might spring to the sofa at any second.

"How can you be working when the computer's not even on?"

"It's my new thing. I'm not using a computer field anymore to put the images together," Desmond said. "My consciousness is too involved that way. It doesn't get deep enough."

"Your stuff is nice though," Antonio said, drying his hands on the thin towel hanging near the sink. Conversations after they merged always ran so much gentler, he thought. He even spoke

better. Why didn't they merge all the time? Right. He usually made some excuse not to. He never wanted the hassle.

"Nice," Desmond repeated. "What's nice? Nice isn't art. Nice is what you put up on a wall at a rib joint. I need to dig into my soul, man, I need to dredge up what's in there."

Antonio was naked; his feet sank into the living room carpet. Desmond had a white bath towel wrapped around his waist, which meant he hadn't bathed.

"I've seen what's in there," Antonio said.

"You've seen what's in my mind."

"So there's something deeper then?" He laid his hand on Desmond's bare back. The big man shifted again.

"What are you hiding?" Antonio asked.

"You shouldn't look at this."

"Come on, let me see." Harsh blue-white LEDs lit the room, though sunbeams pierced the louvres.

"I don't want to scare you."

"Scare me? I'm a grown man. Let me see." Even as he said it, Antonio felt the hairs on his arms rise. He had no idea what was going on but it felt like a scene from a horror movie.

Desmond held up Maisy.

Antonio stepped back, made a sucking yelp. She was a patchwork dummy made of light and a hundred different snippets of images. She didn't wear her face, but more than her face: a single yellow eye; the torn linoleum of her kitchen floor formed her eye socket and a curve of red cheek; the chipped chrome table shone as her teeth; her thick, formaldehyde skin curdled and smelled. How could it smell? In an icy half-heartbeat Antonio looked deep into her, into her ugly core. It was her. Her dark, oily essence. Maisy's black soul.

Desmond hid it away again behind his dark bulk.

"What the fuck is that?" Antonio yelled, stepping into the computer's AV projector.

"I told you! I didn't want you to see it."

"What is it?"

"It's a light sculpture made from the images I captured yesterday."

"Bullshit, man! None of your stuff ever looked like that before."

"This is what I'm saying, I've reached something incredible. I can see...I can see souls now. I know I can. I must get it from my mother's side of the family. They held congress with the spirits, her people. I never believed it before, but after this...."

"Get that fucking thing out of my house! Please, Desmond."

"Okay. Okay. I'm turning it off. It's gone now."

"That too," Antonio said, pointing at the tiny black projector in Desmond's hand. He felt like a kid, like when his drunken uncle ran into his bedroom wearing a zombie mask. Antonio had lost control of his bowels. Fear had total power over him.

"All right." Desmond ran to the kitchen sink and flipped the disposal on. He dropped the projector down the drain. The grind wasn't long enough or loud enough for Antonio's liking. He stretched past Desmond, flipped the switch a couple more times, then stared down the drain, running the water before he relaxed.

His feet felt cold. Pins and needles.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Desmond held him close. "No. I'm sorry. It's over now, forget about it."

"I'm like a fucking baby."

"No you're not. It's all forgotten, come on now." Skin on skin. Tickling hair and warmth.

Once Antonio pulled away, Desmond spoke again.

"Listen. I think...well, you know what I think, don't you?"

"I don't know what you think." Antonio filled his lungs and shook himself. He went to the bathroom to shower. Desmond followed him.

"Tone, about those people. Yesterday."

Antonio stopped. "You want to me ask Sheila to push for legislation so they're not...." He struggled with the next word, a more political word than he wanted to utter.

"Euthanized," Desmond said, nodding.

"Jesus, I don't know, Des. This is my job. I'm worried about making waves. Anybody who steps outside the party line, they're— well, they're not fired, but they're—"

"Treated differently, I know. Evaluations and everything, I know. But can you see, Tone? Can you see this is one of those

things that's bigger than us? We're talking about human lives here, can you see that?"

"Yeah, I know, but I've got to wonder how we're putting food on the table if this goes the wrong way. I'm just—I know what you're saying, I just don't know if I can do this yet."

"But you're friends with the Director."

"Sheila and I worked together a long time ago. I don't even know if she has time for me anymore."

"Enough of this. Come on," Desmond said. "Come back to bed."

"For what?"

"I want to show you something."

"I know this ain't sex. You're always too sore the next day."

"And you can never get it up. It's not sex. Come on." He took Antonio by the hand and led him back to the bedroom.

They found the bed a mess of sheets half off the mattress. Desmond fished under the pillows and withdrew the black vinyl pad by its cord.

"Come on, man. We already did that. I don't want to go through that whole thing again so soon."

Desmond didn't answer him. He moved the pad about eighteen inches toward the foot of the bed, left it in the middle. He stood up and looked at Antonio, who felt his face tighten up. What the hell was Desmond getting at? His face seemed a dark mask, staring at him. He was trying to tell him something, but what? Antonio looked back at the pad.

"Oh, no," he said. "What are you, fucking crazy? We can't do that!"

Desmond, as if activated by Antonio's realization, began straightening the sheets, pulling them over the corners of the mattress.

"It's the soul, Antonio. It's what this is all about. We're connecting now, but we're not really connected."

"You can't get any more connected than the brain. The brain is who we are."

"Really? Point to yourself."

"I gotta pee."

"You just peed. Point to yourself."

Antonio let out a sigh. He slumped, hung his head and crooked his index finger back in his own direction.

"See?" Desmond said. He slapped his huge hand flat on Antonio's chest. "Right here. This is where you're pointing." He lifted his hand and let it come down with a slap again. Antonio's chest tingled with pain. "Who you are is here."

"Yeah, but you're talking suicide, Des!"

"That's what they said about the brain merging too, before they figured it out."

"And people died! They sure haven't figured out what you want to do!"

"I've figured it out. I'm telling you I can see it now. You saw what I made. I know we're going to be safe. I know it. I think you know it too."

"I don't know anything. Why do you want to risk your life on this? Is it that important?"

"It's everything. Don't you see that? And I'm risking something more important to me than my life, Antonio. I'm risking yours. And I wouldn't throw your life away for anything." He wrapped his hand around the back of Antonio's head and drew Antonio to him. "You know I wouldn't. I love you more than I love my own life."

"I know."

"You don't feel the same way, I know."

"Yes I do."

"No, you don't. If there's one thing the two of us can never do, it's keep secrets from each other, right?" He massaged Antonio's scalp and smiled. "Right?"

"I'm sorry," Antonio said.

"You don't have to be sorry. What are the chances two people are going to love one another with exactly the same intensity? One person always feels more love than the other."

Antonio watched the mattress. He couldn't bring himself to look up.

"I guess...." Antonio's mouth worked for a moment. "I'm just...I'm sorry." Another sigh. "If this thing does work, it would even things out, wouldn't it, between us? We'd both feel the same?"

"Yeah."

"It might be worth it then. You deserve a lot better than what you've got right now."

"Don't talk like that."

"Let me take that shower, okay?" he said. "We'll talk in a few minutes."

"All right."

He worked his way around the unmoving man.

The tub was getting grimy, the grout blackening. Antonio's turn to wash it, three days ago. He took a deep breath, smelled the mildew at the same time as he tried to put it out of his head. Hot water hit his aching neck and his hand went to the shampoo dispenser. Odd what they spent their money on.

Three years they'd known each other. So short. But Desmond had helped him get sober. Desmond had held him by the hospital bed when his mother, more tubes and wires than flesh and blood, had finally passed. He saw Desmond's eyes now, their unwavering certainty. Stupid idea. A double suicide on tonight's news sites. But.... But what else did he have in this thirty-five-year-old excuse for a life? If his life ended today, what did he care? Only Desmond mattered to him anymore, and if life ended now, in Desmond's arms, he would be okay.

Minutes later, he toweled off. Took a deep breath of steamy air and opened the bathroom door.

Desmond stood waiting for him. It caught him off guard.

"I...." Antonio began. It hung for a moment.

"Yes?"

"I just can't, Des. I'm sorry." Whatever had run through his head minutes before, it all left him, standing there on the lip of the chasm. Desmond deflated a bit as he sighed.

"It's all right. Come." Desmond beckoned him with open arms and Antonio hugged him. Desmond kissed the scars that woman had made on his face. "Everything's going to be fine."

Still wrapped around him, Desmond pulled him toward the next door, the bedroom. The pad sat there on the bed. The air shimmered red above it as if super-heated. Desmond drew him toward it.

Antonio tried stopping, tried pushing against his lover's shoulders, but Desmond's tree-trunk arms didn't give.

"Des, what the hell!" Antonio shouted. "I said, No! What the fuck are you doing?"

They were on the bed in half a second, Antonio struggling against a man who'd never before put up a fight. A man whose strength he realized he'd never truly had to test.

"Jesus Christ, Desmond, you're going to kill us!" He kicked and felt like a child again, in an adult world, powerless and terrified.

"It's okay," Desmond said, barely audible above Antonio's screams. His eyes held an eerie calm. Antonio struck him in the head as hard as he could. The huge man didn't seem to notice, yet struck back hard enough that Antonio saw a white flash and didn't want to hit anybody ever again. Desmond pulled Antonio into him. Their chests ran slick across each other until one gave in to the other. Ribcages meshed like gears, then moved forward. Antonio's galloping heart rippled into Desmond's pounding one.

Both men screamed, both sets of eyes stayed calm. Both sets of legs kicked for a few moments, then stopped.

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An hour later, they stood inside the computer field in the living room, and pinched the Director's icon on Humanity International's site.

"Yeah," they said, "Antonio Flores, employee number two, two—"

"We have your employee information, Mr. Flores," said the firewall. It wore a very professional, very pretty young woman. Some things would never change, but a part of them appreciated her. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to speak to Director Bascombe, please. If I could. We used to work together about fifteen years ago."

"Hold please," the firewall said.

Sheila Bascombe came on almost instantly.

"Antonio? Hi! It's so nice to see you!"

"You remember me!" they said. "Oh, that's great, Sheila. Listen, I know you don't have a lot of time, but I just wanted to say we have to change the law and we have to change how we do things. Sims are people, Sheila, real people."

"Why are you guys talking like that? It's creepy as hell," Sheila said. "Like you're pod people or something. Who's this with you, Antonio?"

An odd question, but then they realized she could see only their heads. She couldn't see how their chests fused into one. Couldn't tell that although their brains and spinal cords swam distinctly, their lungs synced into a great bellows, wrapped around

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interwoven ribs. She couldn't hear or feel the new horse-trotting beats of their six-chambered heart.

"It's just me," they said. "Antonio."

Doors

Rajan Khanna

The door in the men's washroom leads to a secret world. Head past the stink of piss and shit, a smell you may one day come to regard fondly, and straight for the second stall from the right. Ignore the grunts of the man in the stall next to you. The door won't creak when it closes; it will fit smoothly into the frame.

The tag is on the wall, a stick-figure silhouette framed by a rectangle. It looks like a cross between a primitive cave painting and a European sign. The stage is set. Your heart beats like a rabbit's on speed. The anticipation crackles. You inhale deeply, activate the tag, then turn and open the door.

For a sickeningly-sweet instant, you are not. Your body tingles and fizzles away. Everything that you are becomes as intangible and tenuous as a cloud of smoke on a windy day. Revel in the moment, the nonbeing, before the tether snaps and you are vomited back into the universe.

I hate that part.

I appear in a garden shed, thick with must and the smell of mold. Sunlight filters through a small window in the roof. Scratches mar the wooden wall, lighter wood showing through against the darker grain. "For a good time, call...." is carved into the wall. I pull out my notebook and take down the phone number.

The door opens to the brilliant Australian sun. It was night when I crossed over. Text to Brody: "Another one, Bro."

The sun beats down through a battered ozone layer and warms me through my winter sweater. I decide to find some fun before I move on.

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You will never find this world in a book. It is spelled out on the walls of washrooms, in janitors' closets and bomb shelters, in the scrawl on an alley wall. But only if you know where to look. There are maybe a hundred people across the world who do.

From the moment you find your first tag, you become a collector. Some people collect figurines or stamps or comic books; you collect locations. You're a gambling addict in a million-dollar

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game, a pothead with a giant brick of BC's Finest, a sexaholic at a gang bang.

I used to be into sex. Like really kinky shit. You could tie me up and beat me with a riding crop and I'd be as happy as a pig in shit. Because in those moments, when someone was treating me like an object, I could switch off from bills and mortgages and loans and fucking laundry. Push it to one side and let the pain wash it away.

Fuck S&M, Traveling is better. Fuck meditation, Traveling is better. God help me, fuck sex.

Traveling is better.

I never looked back. Not even when I found out it was killing Brody.

Not even when I found out it was killing me.

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The man sitting across the table, with the gold pinky ring and the cream-colored suit, knows all about Traveling. He sips something called a 'flat white'. He is tall and black, his scalp shaved smooth. He cocks his head to one side.

"New Jersey," I say. "United States." Yeah, fucking Jersey if you'll believe it. I figure it will be an easy score—no one would want to hold on to that. But I need it. And I need it soon.

He scrolls through the screen of his smartphone as I tap my fingers against the table, then shakes his head. "I don't have what you're looking for, but I can give you a way forward. It's up the coast. In a town called Maroochydhore," he says. "It goes—"

I wave off the comment. He smiles. It's not uncommon in our circles, not wanting to know. Part of the thrill is in not knowing.

Now it's my turn to put up. I flip through the pages of the worn notebook, looking at my collection in all its untidy glory. Ink scrawls fill the lines—blue and black, a few in red. Mr. Flat White does want to know, wants something in Europe. I find one. A door from a dressing room in Los Angeles to a hotel broom closet in Amsterdam. It will do. He records the information carefully in his smartphone. Then he gives me the address in Maroochydhore. We trust each other. Our circle is so small that you risk being cut out if you cross someone. No one wants that.

I decide to spend a few days in Brisbane, then hit the beach before Traveling out. It takes a lot out of you. You can't do too

many too fast. And who would want to? The anticipation isn't necessary, but it sure does help.

The days dissolve into a cycle of sun, waves, and sand. I wash my clothes in the sink at the ocean-front motel, and eat fried fish by the bucketload.

I text Brody from bed. It's morning in America. I send him a picture of the beach at sunset. He sends me back a picture of him in his hospital bed, propped up on pillows, hooked up to machines, giving me a thumbs-up.

It's rough. Brody's Traveling days are through. Stuck in a hospital bed every day, eating hospital food. No more 'endless breakfasts'. 'Cause that's what Brody liked to do, Traveling the world in search of good eggs. As he liked to say, "It's always breakfast somewhere." There aren't any tags in the hospital. Believe me, I've checked.

Every time you Travel, it takes a little more of you away. If a cigarette takes seven minutes off your life, I figure each trip takes seven months. At least. The doctors call it all kinds of different names—degenerative neural disease, systemic organ failure, whatever. We know it's from the Traveling. You can spot it on the seasoned Travelers—a tremor in their movements, a slight slurring of the speech, pain they massage away in their hands and arms and legs. I once met a guy who shit himself because of it. Luckily, it was in a bathroom. Yet we all keep doing it. I'd be shocked if I ever met anyone who'd stopped.

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Brody was my Traveling guru after I quit my job at Evertech, after the cubicle and the corporate job, after the tie collection and the two pairs of business shoes (brown and black). When I met Brody I was working as a hair boiler. Yeah, that's right. I boiled fucking hair for a living. Animal hair. Even with all the time I spend these days in toilets, that will always smell worse. The ghost of that stink haunts me. Rotten eggs mixed with curry farts. Take that and multiply by ten. You might get close.

Brody was a hair-boiling veteran. And after he showed me the ropes and we hit it off, I asked him how the hell he'd ended up there at the ass-end of gainful employment.

He was fifteen or twenty years older than me, graying hair, a beard like a biker. He'd been a guitar player in a band for a long

time. Thought they had a shot—a real shot, mind you, not like your average garage band.

Then Fate pissed on his future. Brody found out he had this condition—something to do with his joints or his nerves or something. His hands were shot and he couldn't play guitar any more. He was suicidal. But he knew this guy, this old bartender who used to book the band. This guy was a Traveler. He even worked a bar that was tagged. He knew Brody needed something; otherwise, he was going to do it—stick a gun in his mouth or hang himself or swallow a load of pills. So this old guy tells Brody about Traveling, and suddenly Brody isn't suicidal anymore. Suddenly Brody realizes that he still has a future, and it's glorious.

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My method is a backpack filled with the following: two shirts, pants, some underwear, hiking boots, a sweater, an umbrella, and a bag of weed, among other essentials. I also have the notebook, a small set of tools, and a worldphone (I keep the adapters in the bag) with me at all times.

A bag of weed isn't necessary, but it's an easy way to make money. That's one thing about the doors—there are no border guards, no drug-sniffing dogs. I picked up some stuff from Thailand, too, some really weird shit that I offload where I can.

A worldphone isn't necessary, but it sure does help. In the old days, Travelers would find each other by ads in certain newsletters, or international newspapers. These days, things are different. You've no doubt seen some of our phone numbers. *For a good time, call—*. *Great Chinese Food—*. *Best blowjobs ever—*. *Massages with happy endings—*. Some of those are real numbers, people trying to prank their friends, but most of them are us. All it takes is a little persistence, and a working phone, and you can get another Traveler on the line in no time. Sometimes you need to, especially when you're in a strange place without the proper money to get where you want to go.

Sometimes, though, that's part of the fun.

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I manage three days before I'm headed for the next tag. Three fucking days. I used to be able to manage a week. Maybe more.

The ride up the coast alternates between stretches of beach and housing. I wonder what it would be like to live there, so close

to the sand and the sea. The idea is strangely distasteful. It seems so sedentary. So...restricted.

The road leads to Maroochydore, but my journeys no longer have destinations, only waypoints. Each place becomes a doorway to another.

The sun is starting to set as I reach the address the man gave me. It's a washroom and shower just off the beach. Tags are always in places like that: small spaces with doors and privacy. How often are you going to have someone barge in on you while you're in a stall? Travelers keep the doors working well, oiled up and with working latches. It's in our best interest.

There's a rumor floating around that one of the tags is in an airplane lavatory. Some old plane that's been around since the seventies. I don't believe it, but how cool would that be? In the air, thirty thousand feet above the surface of the earth, and you step out into nothingness.

I pull out my phone and dial Brody. It's become our little ritual. I call him before I go through. It gives him some kind of thrill. Something to think about other than his body failing.

I tell him where I am, what I'm about to do. He gives a chuckle that sounds like gravel crunching and then starts coughing. "How do you feel?" I say.

"Like hell," he says. I hear the beeps and clacks of machinery behind him. "They give me painkillers, but they don't seem to work. I wish I had some weed."

"I'll bring you some," I say. "Talk to you later."

The washroom is empty. It's getting dark and the sun-worshippers have already left. The air smells of the sea, and that funky sulfur odor you get at the beach. It reminds me of boiling hair, but not nearly as bad. My sandals crunch on the sand of the floor. It's the stall all the way against the right wall. My favorite kind. The walls are shiny and metallic, no paint.

Inside, it smells of suntan lotion and cleaning products. At eye-level, on the left stall wall, is a deeply scratched message that reads, *For some deep dicking, call—*. I write the number down in my notebook.

I want to do it. Activate the tag now and step through, but in this moment the anticipation is so keen, I ride it like I will soon ride that other moment. That single glorious moment where I am,

for just a fraction of a second, outside of creation. In that moment, I lose myself, I am nothing. That is everything to me.

Eventually, I give in. Activate the tag. Step through. The feeling is hard to explain. It's as if you're at rest while the universe moves around you, but in a good way. For one brief moment, for one shining moment, you are still. Completely.

You may wonder what happens if someone's taking a dump when you step through, or if someone's in the dressing room on the other end. In those cases, the tag won't work. The first time that happened to me, I freaked out. I thought that maybe the tags had gone dead, or maybe I'd lost the ability to activate them, but then I tried again a few minutes later, and I stepped through into a theatre dressing room after the play had started. I asked Brody about it later and he told me something about mass and energy. The short of it is, sometimes you just have to wait.

I step out into some kind of closet. It's dark but by the light of my phone I take down the number scrawled on the wall. The text is in Spanish. Lucky for me. Four years of high school Spanish isn't necessary, but it sure does help. I can get by okay, even if my pronunciation is shit. The hallway outside smells like dust and wood and in the distance I can see a group of brightly-dressed people. Latin music bleeds through the walls, lively but ghostly.

Heading toward the music leads me out a side door into a music hall. Tables fill the space, packed with people drinking, and, on a center stage, a band pumps out energetic music to a Latin beat. A voice inside me tells me to stay, have a seat, order a local drink, but I have a mission, somewhere I need to find.

I dial the number on the street—a woman answers, speaking with a throaty Spanish accent. We muddle through the particulars and she agrees to meet me at the dance hall. I'm in Lima, Peru. I go back inside, settle into a chair and order a pisco sour.

She shows up halfway through my second sweet drink. A little older than me, with short dark hair and skin the color of coffee, she slips into the seat opposite me. She pulls out a leather zippered portfolio and opens it to reveal her treasure trove. "What are you looking for?" she says.

"New Jersey, in the United States," I say. I think this time might be the one, though that might be the alcohol talking.

She runs a finger down the crisp pages in front of her. "I have New York."

So do I. "No," I say. "I need New Jersey. It has to be."

"Then I'm afraid you're out of luck. I don't have what you're looking for."

"You and everyone else," I say. "Then I'll take the closest door that you have."

The closest door, that she knows of at least, is in Sao Paulo, Brazil. She wants something that leads to Asia. Turns out I have just the thing—a door in La Paz, Bolivia that leads to one in Japan. I've never actually used it; it's just the spoils of good trading. She notes it down in careful and precise penmanship and zips up the folio.

I get up and start making preparations to go to Brazil

- - -

Everything changes after your first time. Your first time, it's better than sex. Better than the first time you discovered masturbation, the first time you got head, the first time you were tied up and hit with a riding crop. Traveling is better than any of that.

Brody introduced me to it. I like to think that he saw something in me, some kindred spirit, some tag of my own to indicate that I wasn't one of the mindless sheep shuffling along in this material existence. Maybe it was because he knew that he was dying, and he wanted to Travel still, by proxy. He never said.

He told me about Traveling, even as he stirred those clumps of hair, waiting for them to curl like some great big pubic soup. About how it didn't matter what he did for a living, because he could Travel the world any time he wanted. Because he knew that all of this (waving his hands like he was feeling up a fat chick) was bullshit, and he had stumbled onto one of the world's secrets.

I, of course, thought he was crazy.

Later that week, he invited me out for a beer and, not wanting to head home to face my divorce papers and the cable that wouldn't work, I said yes.

He took me to this dive bar called Addison's. Place had been around for probably a hundred years. I later learned that's common for tagged sites. They tend to be places that aren't likely to change.

We grabbed a beer first, talked about work, shit like that. Then he led me into the men's room.

I'll admit I was a little scared. I thought he might try something. I hadn't pegged Brody as gay, but I could see him being a

pervert. He looked like someone you might find outside a window, jerking it.

He peered around inside the room, making sure it was empty. One guy was washing his hands so we waited for him to leave. I thought that maybe it was a drug thing, but aside from some pot, and those two times on ecstasy, I wasn't into anything.

He gave me the 'come over here' wave and then opened the stall. I was really nervous now, but I wanted to know what was going on, what Brody was into.

He showed me the tag. I thought it was graffiti. I remember thinking, 'What the fuck?'

"Do you trust me?" he said.

"No."

"Fair enough. Just...just do what I say, okay? In a minute I want you to go out and close the door. When you open it again, I won't be here. What I want you to do then is to look at this here mark, or tag." Then he told me how to activate it. I'm not going to say how it works. You're fucked if you think that.

"It's worth it," he said. "It's worth all of it." It wasn't until much later that I understood what he meant.

I, of course, didn't believe a drop of it. But one minute I heard his voice from inside, and then it went strangely quiet. I looked under the stall, but couldn't see his feet. I was convinced he was pranking me. I would open the door and he would be standing on the toilet, ready to scare me, or piss on me, or something. But when I opened the door, bracing myself, no one was there.

It took me a while, it all seemed so silly, but eventually I had to try. I activated the tag, and then I opened the door.

And stepped into ecstasy.

- - -

The flight to Sao Paulo eats up the money I got from the pot sale, but that's okay. A cab gets me to the restaurant. It used to be a plantation house, but now it's a swanky restaurant. I take my seat at a table for one and decide to eat something before I examine the door. Travelers bring new meaning to the idea of dine and ditch.

The seafood risotto is good and filling, but the caipirinha is what I get excited about. Authentic local drinks aren't necessary, but they sure do help. I excuse myself before the waiter asks about dessert, pass the bathroom, and skip out the back to a small hut.

It's dressed up in religious iconography, but I wonder what it was used for—some place where slaves lived? Maybe. Green trees sway around me in the wind and the air smells clean and fresh. The roar of the endless traffic drifts up from the street. What will the air smell like where I'm about to go?

I'm still drunk when I Travel out.

- - -

No one knows who created the tags, who set up the system, though there are lots of theories. Most people call them the Makers, though I think that shows a distinct lack of imagination. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to the doorways and their relation to one another, either. Some will take you a few hundred miles away. Others will take you across the world.

Some say that they are all positioned at the conjunctions of ley lines, those imaginary connections that the Druids studied. They say that the Makers harnessed the power of the magnetic field or something. That still doesn't explain who they were or how it works. No one has ever established a complete map of them, though, so there's no way to tell if this is true.

Others say that God put the doors in, that it's a way for His Chosen to move around. Those are the kind of Travelers I like the least. They never write, *For a good time, call*—. They usually leave some kind of self-help bullshit message behind.

I don't really care who made the doors, or even why. They exist, and I know about them, and that's enough for me.

Sometimes, when I'm drunk or high, and thinking about this stuff, I imagine this guy, kinda older, hippyish, looks a little like Jesus. He's like this easy-going guy who just bums around a lot—blows into town, hangs out on the beach, does some odd jobs to pay for shit, drinks a bit, and then decides to move on. He has this strange power, and he uses it to live this kind of free, unattached life, not even knowing that this whole secret society has grown up around what he's doing.

Sometimes that thought makes me smile. Sometimes, just sometimes, it makes me incredibly sad.

- - -

I come together into darkness. A room, by the closeness of the air. The black is impenetrable. That's never happened to me before.

I use the light of my phone to look around. A stone room, like some kind of cellar or cell, surrounds me. I don't see any kind of door, no exit.

How?

Panic starts to set in a moment later. Part of Traveling, part of the fucking equation, is being able to move on. I've never heard of a dead end before. It shouldn't be possible.

I swing the phone around. There aren't any skeletons or corpses, so that's encouraging. Unless I'm the first.

I curse that bitch back in Lima. She fucked me over. Well, that won't last very long. All it will take is a few phone calls and she will be blacklisted, barred from the trading process. For Travelers, for me, that would be worse than death.

Then some sense trickles through the panic. I hold the phone out, look for the writing on the wall. I find one number, scratched into the stone at eye level. I dial it. A woman's voice answers, older, raspy.

"How the hell do I get out of here?" I say.

"Ah, you've found my little hole," she says. She has an accent I can't place. French? Or possibly German.

"Just tell me how to get out of here," I say.

"Now, now. Don't be impatient. There are things we must discuss first."

"What things?"

She chuckles across the line. It devolves into a coughing fit. I have to hold the phone away from my ear. "Things you must do before you can leave. The thing is, my dear, I am old and my body no longer holds together the way it should. I can't be hobbling to and fro for every Traveler who comes through. So...you will give me the locations of all the doors you have, and I will let you go."

"You're fucking crazy," I say. I consider hanging up the phone, but then how will I escape? "You do realize that this won't last. Word will get out. No one will use the door. Or worse. Someone could kill you."

"My dear, I'm already dying. I don't have much time left, certainly not enough time to jaunt around discovering new doors in places. No, all I need is a few like you and I'll have my pick. For the last few. The sweet, last few."

As pissed as I am, as badly as I want to claw her eyes out, I sympathize. It's what Brody is going through. Has gone through. It's my future.

"I need you to do something for me," I say.

"You're in no position to make demands," the woman says. She coughs again. It sounds wet and rattly.

"It's not for me," I say. "I have...a friend. He's in the hospital. The Traveling got to him."

Silence.

"He has maybe one trip left. But he's weak and hooked up to machines to keep him alive. I only have one shot to get him out of the hospital. I'm looking for a door near him. In New Jersey. The United States. Please. Please help him."

More silence. Then coughs.

"Please," I say. I don't know that I've ever said it this way before and meant it. But in Brody's spot, I'd want someone to do it for me.

The woman on the other end clears her throat. "Give me all you have and I'll see what I can do."

So I pull out my notebook and my lighter, and by the flame I read her off my list of doors. I can hear her typing on the other end. She's fast, like she used to work in a steno pool. When I'm finished, my lighter is almost dead and the air in the room seems stale.

"Well?" I say.

"Hold on a moment," she says. I exhale. I hear the tapping of keys. "I think I have something for you," she says. She reads off a location in New Jersey not far from Brody's hospital. I smile.

"Thank you," I say.

"Thank you," she says. Then there is a chugging of gears and above me a square of light opens and a rope ladder slides down. In the fucking ceiling. I didn't even check there.

I climb up into some kind of abandoned stone building. I slam through the push-bar door and out into a sleepy European street. Someone down the way is speaking French.

I smile. I know a door in Paris that will take me back to the US. From there I can head to NJ.

We both know that if Brody ever Travels again, it will kill him. But that's what I intend to offer. He's going to die anyway, might as well die doing what he loves. I'll stroll in during visitor

hours, steal a wheelchair, and, when no one is looking, I'll unhook him from the machines and we'll make a break for it. All I have to do is get him to the door.

Imagine a corpse from New Jersey showing up in a stall in Italy. It could attract unwanted attention. But I have to help Brody. He's the one who changed my life.

I know right now that Brody's only regret is that he didn't get to Travel more. A reason to live is very fucking necessary, and, sometimes, so is a reason to die.

In Paris, the tag looks holographic in the bathroom lighting. It seems to squirm beneath my touch as I activate it.

Closing my eyes, taking a deep breath, I step out into oblivion.

Moonlight Sonata for a Proto-Surrealist

[minor keys only]

Jonathan Emerson Hobradsch

Whoever has not known you is without sense.

—Lautreamont

I'm walking with the Comte de Lautreamont in New Orleans where he has never been and I am glad to see that all that was seedy is seedy again. Though with far fewer drunks—more room for two, besides we belong in this poem, but only if it's night. And so it is.

The moon shines as if inverted—which means it's concave, which means it's shining on itself—which means I can't see the Comte's complexion, along the Mississippi—which makes the moon a full moon and a new moon—a new full moon.

We will sit for now, gladly relishing this harsh realization until we can no longer sympathize with each other. Now is a good time for both. The Comte is brooding—he broods well, better when there's an untuned piano in a Parisian hotel.

Poor guy—he's the last and first of his kind—he sees further into one's separate hell than Satan could should Satan see his separate hell, which I guess is hell, but he may be immune to it by now—one can only suppose. He should be remade human and we would see how wide his eyes materialize when he is made Man. Let him fall in and out of love against his will. Satan, not the Comte, who must have vanished under the concave moon scared and weeping in third person.

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Jonathan Emerson Hobradsch

GUD

Contributor Biographies

Jim Pascual Agustin grew up in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship. He writes in Filipino and English. His books are *Beneath an Angry Star* (Anvil Publishing, Manila, 1992) and *Salimbayan: Pagaspas sa Bintana* (Sipat Publications, Manila, 1994). He moved to South Africa in 1994. He thanks William Burkholder for the birth of the poem "All You Had". Jim maintains a blog at matangmanok.wordpress.com.

Lou Antonelli has had fifty stories published in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia since he started writing speculative fiction in 2002. His stories have appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Jim Baen's Universe*, *Dark Recesses*, and *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, among others. His Texas-themed short story collection *Fantastic Texas* was published in 2009 by Wilder Publications, and his next collection, *Texas and Other Planets*, is forthcoming from the Merry Blacksmith Press.

Margaret Bashaar's work has appeared in or is forthcoming from such journals as *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Caketrain*, *So to Speak*, and *Boxcar Poetry Review*, among others. Her work is also forthcoming in the anthology *Time You Let Me In: 25 Poets Under 25* edited by Naomi Shihab Nye. She edits the journal *Weave Magazine*, cohosts the poetry cabaret *The TypewriterGirls*, curates the Pittsburgh Poetry Calendar, and writes reviews for *Weave Magazine* and the *MultiCultural Review*. She can be reached at myhyacinthgirl@gmail.com.

Aliette de Bodard lives in Paris, where she has a job as a computer engineer. In her spare time, she writes speculative fiction: her short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Interzone*, and Gardner Dozois's *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twenty-Sixth Annual Collection*. She was a Campbell Award finalist for 2009. Visit www.aliottedebodard.com for more information.

Andy B. Clarkson is an artist in Columbus, Ohio. He has a background in commercial illustration and murals, though he now focuses on fine art and gallery exhibitions. His work will be shown in upcoming group shows at Last Rites Gallery in October 2009, and 1998 LA in January 2010. His previous work can be seen at his blog: andybclarkson.blogspot.com.

Tara Deal is the author of the poetry chapbook *Wander Luster* (Finishing Line Press) and of the novella *Palms Are Not Trees After All*, which won the 2007 Clay Reynolds Novella Prize from *The Texas Review Press*. Her poetry has appeared in magazines such as *West Branch*, *Flyway*, *failbetter.com*, and *nthposition*, among others. Visit her website at www.taradeal.com.

Lindsey Duncan is a lifelong writer and professional Celtic harp performer, with short fiction and poetry in several speculative fiction publications. She feels that music and language are inextricably linked. She lives, performs, and teaches harp in Cincinnati, Ohio. She can be found on the web at www.LindseyDuncan.com/writing.htm.

Bob Evans: Over twenty, thirty, forty, and fifty. Dabbles in making images, photography, and mixed media. Been working as a wildland firefighter for several years. Lives with his wife, who raises dairy goats, outside Cody, Wyoming. www.flicker.com/photos/bobevansimages or bw35mm@hotmail.com.

Jonathan Emerson Hobradsch was born in Dallas, Texas. He received his MFA at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. Currently, he lives in New York City and teaches at Pace University.

Molly Horan is currently an MFA candidate at the New School University. Her YouTube channel, youtube.com/graguigleadhair, features author interviews and musings about footy pajamas. She also blogs at roomforthecheeseslices.blogspot.com about cute tsar names, blessed Kateritykawitha, Dr. Seuss, and other worthy subjects.

Teresa Houle reads, drinks tea, and occasionally writes in Victoria, BC. She has a blog. And one day she'll update it. dragonstories.wordpress.com.

Brett Elizabeth Jenkins currently lives and writes in Austin, Minnesota. She has her MFA from Bennington. Look for her work in *Anderbo*, *PANK*, *The Potomac Review*, *decomp*, and elsewhere. Email her at brett.e.jenkins@gmail.com.

Jennifer Jerome is a native New Yorker. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in various publications, including *Ideomancer*, *ChiZine*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *The Comstock Review*, *flashquake*, and *So to Speak*. For more about her work, cast your 'net at www.jenniferjerome.com.

Aunia Kahn was born and raised in Detroit, MI. Kahn's works are a combination of numerous disciplines wrapped into one, which create a hybrid art form consisting of melding photography, painting, and collage. Each work makes use of her own likeness in movie-like stills of elegant decadence, varying taboo and often controversial subject matter to challenge the viewer, their understanding, and preconceived notions; yet she connects through honest feeling and emotions present in today's society. She designs, builds, and executes characters, nonexistent places, dreams, illusions, fears, and fables. www.auniakahn.com or www.silvereratarot.com.

Rajan Khanna is a fiction writer, blogger, narrator, and graduate of the 2008 Clarion West Writers' Workshop. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Shimmer*, *Basement Stories*, *Steampunk Tales*, *Abyss & Apex*, and *The Way of the Wizard*, among others. He writes about genre television and fiction for Tor.com and about beer and wine at *FermentedAdventures.com*. His podcast narrations can be heard at *Podcastle*, *StarShipSofa*, and *Lightspeed Magazine*. Rajan lives in Brooklyn, where he's a member of the NYC-based Altered Fluid writing group.

In real life, **Rose Lemberg** is an assistant professor of Marginal and Nostalgic Studies at a large Midwestern university. In surreal life, she writes fiction and poetry for the sole purpose of throwing it at slushpiles. Her fiction was last seen at *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *GUD*. Her poetry popped up at *Abyss & Apex* and *Goblin Fruit*, among other venues, and has been nominated for the Rhysling award. She edits *Stone Telling*, a magazine of boundary-crossing poetry. Rose can be found at www.roselemborg.net.

E. H. Lupton lives in Wisconsin with her husband and her cat. In addition to studying library science, she runs marathons, draws a web comic, and makes things up. She can be reached at ehlupton@gmail.com, or visit her website at www.pretensesoup.com.

Ian McHugh is a grand prize winner in the Writers of the Future contest and a winner at Australia's Aurealis Awards. He graduated from Clarion West Writers' Workshop in 2006. His bibliography and links to read or hear most of his prior publications free online can be found at ianmchugh.wordpress.com. "Annicca" was inspired by a ten-day silent meditation retreat he attended in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney.

Dave Migman is a writer, artist, and stone carver currently residing in Edinburgh. His poetry has appeared in *Angelic Dynamo*, *The Rialto*, *The Glasgow Review*, *Poetry Monthly*, *Pulsar*, and *Harlequin*. He is also a regular contributor for *Polluto* magazine. His first novel, *The Wolf Stepped Out*, is now available from Dog Horn Publishing.

Bryan C. Murray, poet, graduate of Virginia Tech's MFA program, 2010 Winner of the Emily Morrison Poetry Prize, has published recently with *Sou'wester*, *Dark Coast Press*, *The Legendary*, and *The Northville Review*, among others. Bryan has completed a book-length manuscript, "full water," which is currently seeking a publisher. He was born and raised in the Bronx, NYC.

Shweta Narayan has lived in six countries on three continents, and done rather a lot of bridging in the process. Her fiction and poetry tend to do the same, but this is the first time she's really poked at it so directly. Shweta's work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Goblin Fruit*, and the *Beastly Bride* anthology. She was the Octavia Butler Memorial Scholarship recipient at the Clarion workshop in 2007. She can be found on the web at shwetanarayan.org.

Lydia Ondrusek is a long-married mother of two who describes herself as writing her way out of a paper bag. Her fiction (mostly Flash) and poetry can be found in various places, including *Flash Fiction Online* and *Apex Magazine*. Like everyone else in this and all other parallel universes, she is writing a novel. Okay, two. She tries and mostly fails to keep www.lydiaondrusek.com updated, and spends too much time on Twitter, where she is known as @littlefluffycat.

Marina Richards's fiction and poetry have been published in *Scalped*, *Blood Lotus*, *Foliage Oak*, *The Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *The Legendary*, *Pear Noir!*, *Up the Staircase*, and *Writer's Bloc* (Rutgers University), among others. In 2010, she was nominated for the Million Writers Award for her short story "Lena". She lives with her husband and animals outside of Boston and is represented by literary agent Catherine Drayton of Inkwell Management in New York City.

Matthew Sanborn Smith's work has appeared in *ChiZine*, *Albedo One*, and the *StarShipSofa* podcast and will soon appear at Tor.com. He podcasts at bewarethehairymango.com. He thanks his dear friends Grant Stone and the late Mike Ramshaw for their valuable input during the writing of "Maisy's Many Souls".

Richard Spuler's poems have appeared in numerous literary magazines. He is currently working on a collection of short stories and poetry (*Memorabilia and Other Assorted Forgettables*). For nearly twenty years he has served as Senior Lecturer in German at Rice University in Houston, TX. He enjoys music and reading.

After twenty years of wandering desolate as a writer, **Ferrett Steinmetz** attended the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop in 2008 and was rejuvenated. Since then, he's sold stories to *Asimov's Science Fiction* (twice!), *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Shimmer*, and *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, among others, and otherwise has a marvelous collection of very personalized rejection letters. He lives in Cleveland with his wife, a well-worn copy of *Rock Band* ("Painkiller," Expert, four stars), and a friendly ghost. Should you want more of Ferrett Steinmetz, he blogs about puns, politics, and polyamory at *The Watchtower of Destruction* (theferrett.livejournal.com).

Elizabeth Kate Switaj's photographs have appeared in *Carpe Diem Review*, *The Sylvan Echo*, *Schmap* travel guides, and *Kaleidowhirl* as well as on the cover of *Boxcar Poetry Review's* 2006 anthology. Her professional experience includes teaching in cities throughout Japan, China, and the US. She is currently researching James Joyce (and drinking Guinness) at Queen's University Belfast. For more information visit www.elizabethkateswitaj.net.

Lavie Tidhar is the author of linked-story collection *HebrewPunk* (2007), novellas *An Occupation of Angels* (2005) and the forthcoming *Cloud Permutations* (2009) and *Gorel & The Pot-Bellied God* (2010), and, with Nir Yaniv, the short novel *The Tel Aviv Dossier* (2009). He also edited the anthologies *A Dick & Jane Primer for Adults* (2008) and *The Apex Book of World SF* (2009). He's lived on three continents and one island nation, and currently lives in Southeast Asia.

Bob Tippee writes from Houston, Texas, where he is a magazine editor. Born in St. Louis, he has a bachelor's degree from the University of Tulsa.

Arthur Wang has loved art since he was a kid. When growing up, his first venture into the field resulted in images of crashing and toxic trains and cargo, tanks, and little soldiers. Since then, his skills have evolved into something more refined, sometimes light and humorous, and others dark and lonesome. Arthur currently attends the Rochester Institute of Technology, and can be found at www.ArthurWangArt.com. He's also an awesome cook.

Sue Williams is a British writer who lives in the USA. Her fiction has appeared in *Narrative*, *Night Train*, *Salamander*, *Redivider*, *Dream Catcher*, and numerous other books and magazines. Sue works as an Assistant Editor at *Narrative Magazine* and teaches writing seminars at Grub Street, Boston. She is working on the final draft of a novel, along with a story collection entitled *Touch Me, I'm a Monster*. You can find her online at: www.suewilliams.co.uk.

Caroline M. Yoachim is a writer and photographer living in Seattle, WA. She is a graduate of the Clarion West Writers' Workshop, and her fiction has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. For more about Caroline, check out her website at: carolineyoachim.com.

Catherine Zickgraf is indebted to MySpace for helping her find her long-lost son whom she placed for adoption two decades ago—thus you can find her blog there: myspace.com/czickgraf. Her writing has appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *PANK*, and the catalonian review.



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